

116-7

(2)

Rentor \$2.00
Responsible Agency.

K 16-7

(2)

Keep Your Card in This Pocket

Books will be issued only on presentation of proper library cards.

Unless labeled otherwise, books may be retained for two weeks. Borrowers finding books marked, defaced or mutilated are expected to report same at library desk; otherwise the last borrower will be held responsible for all imperfections discovered.

The card holder is responsible for all books drawn on this card.

Penalty for over-due books 2c a day plus cost of notices.

Lost cards and change of residence must be reported promptly.



Public Library
Kansas City, Mo.

Keep Your Card in This Pocket

BERKOWITZ ENVELOPE CO., K. C., MO.

KANSAS CITY, MO PUBLIC LIBRARY



0 000000 000000 4

DATE 1/1/12

GENTLE ANNIE

A Western Novel

Other Books by MacKinlay Kantor

DIVERSEY

EL GOES SOUTH

THE JAYBIRD

LONG REMEMBER

TURKEY-IN-THE-STRAW

THE VOICE OF BUGLE ANN

AROUSE AND BEWARE

THE ROMANCE OF ROSY RIDGE

THE NOISE OF THEIR WINGS

VALEDICTORY

CUBA LIBRE

GENTLE ANNIE

A Western Novel by

MacKINLAY KANTOR



New York

COWARD-McCANN, INC.

COPYRIGHT, 1942, MacKINLAY KANTOR

All rights reserved. This book, or parts thereof, must not be reproduced in any form without permission.

Gentle Annie is published at the same time in the Dominion of Canada by Longmans, Green and Co.

lg

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO DONALD

GENTLE ANNIE

A Western Novel

/

WHEN THE TRAIN SLOWED DOWN FOR PAHOKA City I began to see the houses come past, and a tall shed or two, and some cattle corrals. I stepped carefully across the coupling-blocks and planted myself in the blank doorway of the baggage car.

That would help to conceal me from any trainmen going past, and when we went by the station people would not think that I was perched too suspiciously behind the tender, daring all manner of gods, men and devils.

I got my bundle between my boots and edged my feet together to hold the bundle. I gripped black bars with both hands, just waiting, holding my breath against the steam and cinders, against the rising current of excitement that I was bound to feel.

The engineer began to use his air; all the cars bumped and scraped—all those big yellow wooden blocks with their gritty glass windows, banging up and squeezing behind me, and the engine and tender squeezing and halting ahead. Once in Kansas I had seen an engine and express car that jumped the S. C. & W. tracks when two 'bos were on the blind bag-

gage, and I saw what was left of the 'bos. I always thought of that when I saw anyone on blind baggage; and now here I was, riding into Pahoka City that very way myself.

Black smoke curved between the cars, full of sand and hornets. I took another breath and then held it. The station's bay windows ran by; they were open because the day was hot, and an agent with black sateen over his elbows was getting up and reaching for something. I saw other faces (some of them were Indians); then a couple of baggage trucks without much baggage on them, and then the red wooden ribs of a water tank. . . . Smoke lifted and went away.

I pressed back in the car's doorway, listening, beginning to breathe again. Cinders along the roadway went *crush, crush, crush* and the brakeman appeared.

He was a burly young man with blue overalls and a shiny visored cap. It struck me, as he stood scowling up, that if I had really been what I pretended to be I would have hated his face. I didn't like it any too well even now.

"All right," he said.

I didn't move.

"Get down!"

I didn't say anything—just waited, conscious of my grime and beard-stubble, and looked at him.

He snapped his fingers. "Get down."

The steam-dome opened up for a moment and we had to yell through the noise. "I'm not hurting anything," I said.

"Get down off there, or I'll pull you off!" By that time a lot of other feet were sounding on the hollow wooden planks of the platform, and then on the

cinders. People around the station were hurrying to see the fun.

When I swung one leg around the corner of the car, feeling for the cleat, the brakie grabbed my boot with both hands and tugged a little. That made me mad because he almost upset me. I dropped alongside the car, bundle and all, and when the brakie saw my face he stepped back quickly and made a fist.

"Go on," he said. "Get to traveling, or I'll have you picked up."

"I was traveling," I said. Two or three people in the crowd that was watching laughed when I said it. I slung my bindle, and started up the track close beside the coaches.

In the next car-length I met the conductor; his seersucker coat was flapping as he ran, stiff-legged and old. His face was strained.

I stepped back to let him run past. "It's all right," I said. "It's all right, Dad. I was on the blinds, but now I'm off."

It wasn't acting—it was real excitement; a second later I knew all about it.

"Bart! Ace!" the conductor yelled. "He's dead."

"Who's dead?"

"McKinley. He's dead."

Other voices rose, telling the brakie and engineer and fireman about it. I could see the engine crew leaning out of the cab, hearing the news. People in the crowd said that a telegram had come in; the operator there at Pahoka City must have got the flash (somewhat delayed, it turned out) while we were rambling south from Oakley, the next station above. Maybe it came soon after we left Portersville, Kansas, because

Oakley was only a flag-stop, and we hadn't cut down for Oakley.

Now I was beside the mail car, and the clerk clung to the door jamb, looking out. In his excitement he forgot about my being a bum; he talked easily and naturally with me.

"You've got a new boss," I said.

"That's right. We sure have got a new boss now. Wonder what kind of a president Teddy will make, anyway?" He considered for a moment. "Tell you what they ought to do: they ought to run all these anarchists out of the country. They ought to electrocute the whole lot of them."

I said, "There's one who will be electrocuted now, anyway."

"Nothing is too bad for a man that would deliberately shoot a President," said the mail clerk. He was an undersized fellow but he felt big wearing his gun. It is something funny that I have noticed: men who are used to packing guns twenty-four hours a day never seem to swagger when they wear them. But maybe this was a new clerk. Anyway, he patted his gun, and said that if he got a chance at Czolgosz or Emma Goldman or all the rest of those anarchists he would let daylight through them.

While he was talking I gripped my bundle and went up on the platform. I kept wondering about Roosevelt. I had voted for Bryan the year before.

Four men climbed from the cars farther back. I looked them over without seeming to, which is something you have to learn in my business—or what was my business in those days. Two of the passengers were

cattlemen. I knew the type well enough: store clothes powdered with tobacco ash, and bright lodge-charms on their watch chains, and eyes that had squinted at Oklahoma Territory when it was all Indian country. There were a couple of drummers, tired and hot, lugging their satchels and sample-cases.

I glanced at the rear coach; that was when I first saw her. She was standing on the coach's platform, looking puzzled and helpless. She had two bags on the platform with her, but she couldn't get down with her skirts and all.

I guessed she was about twenty-one, but it turned out later that I was two years over the mark. She wore a black traveling-suit with big flat white pearl buttons on the jacket, and the jacket was very tight. She was small and well-shaped, though her hips were a little broad. Her mouth was broad, too. I could see it: a firm, Irish mouth under the cheap wide-meshed veil drawn down from her hat and tied under her chin. A big hat, such as women wore then: bunchy with chicken feathers, pinned squarely atop the girl's reddish, brownish, high-piled hair.

She clutched the hand-rail and leaned forward, gazing first at the ground and then down the track toward the trainmen. If she wanted to get off—and apparently she did—it was that brakie's job to help her; but he had been intent on yanking me off the blind baggage when the conductor told him that I had been spotted there. The back coach stood clear past the depot; the bottom step was a good three feet above the grade.

I dropped my bundle on the edge of the platform and went to the last coach.

"You want to get off, lady?"

"That brakeman," she said angrily. "Isn't he supposed to help me off?"

"Yes, but he had a little excitement down yonder. They just got the news: McKinley died."

She looked horrified. Her big green eyes went wide, and she said, "Gee, that is awful! Will Teddy Roosevelt be our President now?"

"I guess he already is, lady."

She studied my clothes and the four-day shrubbery on my face. "You're just a hobo, aren't you?"

"I was on this train. If you'll slide that big bag out where I can grab it, I'll set it down for a step."

She moved the bag a little. It was a canvas extension-case heavily strapped. I put it on the cinders and reached up for the other bag—a little brown valise—and then held my free hand to the girl.

She caught up her skirts and came down the steps. She turned sideways to reach the big bag with her foot; I should have looked away, but I was still young enough, and she was pretty. I saw her shabby slipper, small and square with a middling high heel, feeling for a resting place; I noticed that the strap of her slipper had been mended. I looked shamelessly at her leg, the part I could see, and heard the brakeman coming up at last and saying rapidly, "Here, move on! I'll take care of this lady." But I didn't even turn my head.

I saw the petticoat then, and I thought of the girl's mouth suddenly—an Irish mouth—because the flounces on that petticoat were of Irish lace, delicate and snowy. My mother had worn such petticoats sometimes, and so I thought of my mother on the rare occasions when I saw them: I thought of her not rever-

ently, but wistfully, and with the natural admiration of a man. It was all vague . . . I couldn't understand it . . . it was mixed and tremulous: the beauty of women, the thrill and wonder which their clothes suggest—the memory of perfume and rustle which goes back to man's babyhood, and is associated with the strength for life which he drew, in his beginning, from another woman.

It comes down the years now: that little swish of garments, the tight black sheath of stocking showing through the wealthy points of lace. Then the girl, standing on the cinders and mumbling her word of thanks—and myself, turning away a face that flamed hot beneath its beard.

"Here," said the brakeman, "I'll take those bags. I told you to get away from this train."

The girl started toward the station. I guess she didn't know which one of us would bring her bags, but she was pretty enough to know that one of us would do it.

Somehow I had come to think of myself as actually being the bindle-stiff that I appeared. I wanted to tell the brakeman where to go. But there was a certain dignity and importance of my office to be preserved; so I said, scarcely moving my lips, "Thanks." I carried the canvas extension-case and valise over to the bay window by the signal post, where the girl was already talking with the station agent.

"Hanrahan? Why, I don't know. . . ." The agent called to an expressman, "Jacobs, what was the name of that old soldier and his wife, lived out on the Oakley road? You know: the old man with one wing gone—wore a Yankee overcoat—"

The girl cried, "That's him! That's my uncle. He lost his arm in the War."

"Why," said the expressman, "they moved out, with creditors chasing them."

"When?" she cried, her face pasty under the veil.

"Month or so back," said the expressman.

Steam burst from the engine; you couldn't see the drivers for a minute; the conductor's voice sounded thin, and then the bell began to bang, and a shudder went through the five cars. The train left Pahoka City, making a lot of noise.

The girl stood, with one glove pulled off and her red little hand mashing the glove. She was saying, when her voice could be heard: "You mean—they've moved clear away. Gone. Mr. and Mrs. Hanrahan—they aren't in Pahoka City any more?"

"That's right, lady."

"Maybe past Enid in the Strip somewheres," said another man in the group.

At the other end of the platform I gathered up my bundle. The main street of the town ran up a slope of prairie opposite the station. I could see two rows of wooden store fronts, and hitching rails with perhaps a dozen saddle-horses and three or four teams tied and waiting. Pahoka City looked dead under the warm autumn sky and under the blue shade of low-moving clouds. I kept thinking of that girl, standing alone on the platform, anguished and intent, wondering where on earth an old Union veteran named Hanrahan had gone.

Then I knew that I had to put her out of my mind. This was one of the most important jobs I had ever been called upon to do; it had to be done right. I

couldn't get mixed up with some unknown girl's perplexities, even if a hundred Hanrahans vanished in the Cherokee Strip.

Nevertheless I heard her voice, remote and sad, addressing the agent. "Mister, would it be all right if I left my satchels in the office-place for a while?"

"All right, sis. I'll keep an eye on them." After she had moved away a man whistled. He said, in not too delicate a whisper: "Keep an eye on her, too." There were cackles of laughter, and more whispers; then the station agent, chuckling, "Not when a man's my age!" Then the last laughter, with the girl's small footsteps somber on the big planks.

I started toward the stores. At the foot of the slope there was a horse-trough and pump. I wanted to get at least one layer of cinders and coal smoke off my face. I crossed the ruts and dried puddles of a very bad road, and washed where horses had drunk.

One clean bandana was put away in my hip pocket, and I unfolded it for a towel. As I was drying my face, I observed the young woman in the black suit walking up the slope. She held her hands stiffly at her sides. There were two Indians sitting in a buckboard—ponderous men with braided hair—and they turned solemnly as if a lever propelled them, watching her.

She went up some steps and into a store on top of the hill. The sky was desolate beyond that town. Far south on the prairie, the retreating train blew and wailed.

2

NOW I THOUGHT OF BUYING SOMETHING TO EAT. While I stood by the trough, waving my wet bandana in the wind, my attention was drawn to a peculiar figure moving up the road that crossed the S. C. & W. tracks just west and south of the station.

A quarter-mile away was a new white house with spindly cottonwoods planted before the door, and a lot of wagons and unharnessed horses and mules clustered at the fence; apparently it was from there that this strange little man had come.

He toiled up the slope with something black flapping behind him. Hoisted across his shoulder was what I took to be a surveyor's tripod; when he came closer I could see that it was a camera—a big one with three stiff red legs.

He picked his way among the chuck-holes that marked the path. I stood, not idly, but because I wanted to talk to the townspeople as soon as possible; and this one looked as if he might be willing to stop for a few words.

Before he reached me I began to operate the pump

handle, pretending that I needed a drink, but in reality to appeal with the suggestion of cold water.

The stranger sighed, and set the heavy camera down on its legs, and twisted the cloth so that it wouldn't blow away. I drank water that I did not want, and watched him.

He might have been sixty, he might have been sixty-five. His eyes were sad and weak behind smudged glasses, and the eyelids sank in red pouches. A little man in baggy black clothes; his trousers were belted with rattlesnake skin. . . . He had a dirty yellow-white beard, and a smell of whisky about him.

"Water," he said. "Water, sir! God's best gift, even in these parts."

He drank from the well-spout, getting himself wet.

"How much of God's best gift have you drunk in the last twenty years, mister?" But I grinned at him when I asked the question.

He said, "Not more than I could help. Still, liquor comes high out here, and I'm just making a bare living."

"You take pictures for a living?"

He shook the drops out of his beard and said frankly, "I wish I could do nothing else. But there isn't enough picture-taking to be done in Bush County, so I got me a little store. I sell paints and varnishes and the best patent medicines. . . . You got an unfamiliar face, stranger."

"My name is Rich Williams. I was riding the blinds, trying to make Tulsa. The brakie picked me off down here."

We shook hands. "The name, sir, is Barrow—Lu-

cian Barrow. I reckon it doesn't mean much as a name, but I'll have you know that I photographed with none other than Matthew Brady during the War."

"Not in Cuba?"

"Pshaw, that wasn't any shakes of a war. No, no, I mean the Civil War. I was with Brady for four months, assisting him, when I was only seventeen. That don't mean nothing to folks in Pahoka City. They're mostly rebs."

"That brakie," I said, wishing to bring up the subject of the railroad again, "he might have been a son of a reb. Maybe a son of something else."

Mr. Barrow took two plate-holders out of the pocket of his baggy coat, and examined them, and slid them back again. "Don't blame the brakeman, son," he said. "The S. C. & W. is nervous these days. They had robberies a while back."

"You don't say."

"Yes, yes. A hold-up. Train robbers. They stopped the night train between Oakley and a place on the prairie that folks call Eagle Hill. It isn't much of a hill but— Yes, they robbed the train. It was the second robbery in a year. We never had none before."

"I've heard tell of the Daltons," I said.

"Oh, the Daltons wasn't around here—they worked over west on the Santa Fe."

I wanted to know how any train robbers could stop one of those fast passengers.

"They burned lights," said Mr. Barrow. "I reckon it's easy, son, to stop a train if you're a born train robber, and know how."

Now he was calling me "son" instead of "sir," and I rather liked that, not knowing quite why.

"You know, these kind of cartridge things that railroads light for signals? There was one beside the track, just before the engine got to the Eagle Hill curve. It was a flare that meant Caution—to Go Slow—so the engineer went slow. He got around the curve and there was a torpedo that meant stop. Of course he had to stop."

Mr. Barrow pretended to be a train, stopping.

"About that time three men come down on him. One was an Indian with a shotgun; they all had pillow-cases over their heads, with great big eyes cut out, but folks could tell that this fat one was an Indian—a Cherokee, maybe—because he didn't say nothing only to grunt, and his black braids were sticking down under the pillow-case he wore. I wish I could of got a photograph of that train robbery."

He stood watching the little dust-devils swirl in the shapeless road, and musing on the idea. He had built a picture in my mind, just as if I had not heard the story and all the testimony of trainmen in every detail, long before this. I could imagine the glow of burning flares, the weird activity of those white-hooded figures.

"They got all the trainmen together," related Mr. Barrow, "and the Indian with his gun kept the passengers back. Then they made them uncouple the baggage car, and they got aboard, and made the engineer haul them three miles across the prairie, and then they stopped. Folks say that they got many thousands of dollars."

"Out of the mail, I suppose?"

"No, no. That was funny—they never touched the mail. They got thirty-five hundred in pay roll money that the railroad was taking to the new branch west of

Tulsa. Express money they got, too—about twelve hundred. Sonny, don't you blame that brakeman for hauling you off of the blinds! He's got his orders," and Mr. Barrow shouldered the camera again.

He explained: "I took a family group at the Wilkes place. They're having a golden wedding."

A horse stamped close. I thought someone must be riding up to let his horse drink, but the rider wanted to talk to Mr. Barrow. This rider was a big man with a brushy red mustache; he sat a silver-mounted saddle on a black mare that was worth two months of my salary if she was worth a nickel.

The man with the red mustache whistled at Mr. Barrow as one might call a dog. The photographer spread his camera tripod against the ground and went limping quickly around the trough.

"Look here, Barrow." The man on horseback spoke in a low tone. "They're no good. What are you trying to come on me, anyway?"

"Ain't trying to come nothing, Mr. Tatum!" cried the old man, with some show of being insulted. "I took the best photographs I knew how."

Mr. Tatum glowered at me because quite obviously I was listening. He spoke, even more subdued, but I could still hear him.

"Look here, you old whisky-sucker! I want to sell that saloon, and I've got two prospects. I won't send them those pictures; I won't pay you for them, either. I don't know how you done it, but you made the bar look about four feet long. The mirror hardly shows; you made the whole place look like a dime lunch-counter. Nobody would ever buy Cookson's Bar on the strength of those photographs. You hustle up this

afternoon and take some more, if you know what's good for you!"

Old Barrow wrung his hands.

"I can't take pictures of Cookson's Bar in the afternoon, Mr. Tatum! The light ain't right. I can only take it late in the forenoons—when I got that strong light through the front——"

"See that you show up tomorrow morning, then," said Tatum.

"Tomorrow's Sunday."

"What the hell difference does that make? You show up. You better be sober, too, or you'll get a swift kick." Tatum looked at me and raised his voice. "Who are you?" he asked with insolence.

"My name is Williams," I told him, "if it matters much."

"Don't get gay. Are you a bum, or do you want to work?"

"The brakeman on that train thought I was a bum, while ago. I might want a job. It depends."

"You want to work cattle?"

I laughed. "I'm no puncher, and most people wouldn't think I was. I'm a carpenter by trade," which had been more or less true when I was trying to work my way through college.

Tatum growled something about the fact that there was no work for any damn carpenter in Pahoka City. He rode up the grade toward the lines of store buildings. He loped his mare for fifty yards, and let her circle on her hind legs—she seemed just burning up—and then he took her at a trot. I didn't like his looks; but he could certainly sit that mare. He kept her well, also.

"Who's that?"

Mr. Barrow said that that was one of the Holy Twins, and he swore a little. "Two of them," he said. "Brothers. They were Sooners, and they own half of everything around here."

"I thought every man in Oklahoma was a Sooner."

"No, no! It's not like—well, like the Pukes in Missouri where I used to be. The Sooners came in first, before the bugle blew, before the gun was shot off. They didn't have any business here, but they grabbed the best ground and there was nothing could be done about it. Those Tatums raise cattle, and they talk about digging for oil, and they own Cookson's Bar and the hotel and other real estate, and they lend money and break folks a-doing it. That's Charley—Charley Tatum."

The old man added, "Honest, I hate him. Reckon I hate all rich men! Still Pahoka City is dying on its knees, despite the best or worst the Tatums can do. They'll unload and pull out, while the pulling is good, and go yonder in the Strip somewheres."

That reminded me. I looked at the bleak stores and wondered what had become of a girl with pretty legs and an Irish lace petticoat. "Ever know a man named Hanrahan around here?"

"Thomas Hanrahan!" exclaimed the photographer. "One of the Lord's best and noblest. Him and his wife both. Many is the bottle we've emptied together, and many is the Rebellion we've fought over again."

We moved toward the business district. I wanted to carry his heavy camera but the old man wouldn't let me. He said that the camera was very valuable, and

he dared not trust anyone else with it. It looked like a pretty ratty camera to me.

"Thomas Hanrahan . . . him and Annie, his wife." Barrow looked around cautiously before he spoke again. "The Tatums stole their place," he whispered. "It was mortgaged for a song, and Thomas had no money, and the Tatums foreclosed. Thomas and Annie lit out in their wagon, at night, for the wagon was mortgaged too. They're gone—no man knoweth where," he added with relish.

He asked how I knew of the veteran Hanrahan.

"There was a girl at the depot asking after him. I heard the talk."

On the west side of the main roadway wooden sidewalks were built into long platforms at different elevations in front of the stores, to keep pedestrians out of the mud in wet seasons. You had to go up and down sagging steps, and in some cases planks which tilted from lower levels to the higher places. There were wooden awnings supported by rusty iron pipes, by rough wooden posts. But every board seemed baked and curling; and I understood why poor Mr. Barrow was starving to death. I don't think anyone had bought a can of paint in that town since the Strip opened.

There were a few people along the street. A speckled sign hung in front of a restaurant. *Kite's Cafe*. One end of the sign had been shot away by a shotgun blast. I looked in through dusty windows; I could see catsup bottles and the proprietor in a dirty apron, but not many customers.

"This the restaurant?"

"It's the main one," said Barrow. "Some folks eat over at the hotel, but neither one is any great shakes."

"Will you come in and have some dinner with me?"

The old man seemed tempted for a few seconds, but he said hastily: "No, no, son—with all thanks to you. I got to develop my golden wedding pictures as quick as can be." He went laboring away with his camera.

I stepped into Kite's Cafe and ordered dinner. The proprietor measured me scornfully.

"First I want to know if you got any money on you. Trade is slack, and I don't need no dishwashers."

As a matter of fact I had seven hundred dollars on me, but it was where no one could find it very easily. I displayed the three crumpled dollar bills which I carried in the pocket of my old denim pants.

"Just wanted to ask. You can't hold that against me." He went into the kitchen at the rear, and soon I smelled ham frying. The other customers were a couple of farm boys eating sick-looking sandwiches. They finished their sandwiches, dropped some nickels on the counter, and went away.

The proprietor returned from the kitchen. He was big and bald, and had asthma and a bad breath; he breathed noisily, wheezing through his nose as he served my food. The ham was thin and overdone; there were little side dishes of cold potatoes, canned corn, canned peas, canned peaches. The coffee was grayish, full of chicory, and very hot.

After he had served me, the restaurant man went over behind the counter and leaned on his hairy arms. A little cow-bell tinkled with a soft, sweet note, and we both looked to see the front door open. The girl

in the black suit and veil, the pretty girl I had seen at the train, came in. Her face was white but she kept trying to smile with assurance, and she was still twisting that glove in her hand.

3

SHE HEADED STRAIGHT FOR THE COUNTER. I doubt that she even saw me sitting near by, or that she remembered, in a moment of such resolution and anxiety, the bindle-stiff who had carried her bags at the depot. . . . This was the most disagreeable thing in the world, but she was bound to go through with it.

I sat with my back against the ugly yellow-papercd wall; the girl and the cafe-owner were less than a dozen feet away.

"I wonder if you would be interested in giving me a job?"

The proprietor's gaze was all over her in a moment. "Well, that depends. Can you wait table?"

"I'm the best waitress you ever saw."

"Can you cook, honey?"

She didn't like his calling her honey; I could see her swallowing. "Yes, I can cook some."

"I hain't noticed you around before. What's your name?"

"Annie Lingen. I'm from St. Louis."

His glance wrapped her waist, and I had a crazy notion to pick up the ketchup and go for him. "I won't

pay you much. Maybe six-bits a day and your meals."

"How many days do I work?"

"Six. I'm not open Sundays; not enough trade."

Annie Lingen stood looking at him. "Can I start now, mister?"

A buggy turned in the roadway outside the front windows. The horse arched its neck above the rail directly in front of Kite's Cafe; it was a tall buckskin horse with belly marks where a saddle girth had rubbed, but it seemed to travel well in harness too. A man got out of the buggy and whipped a halter-knot around the rail. He came into the restaurant; the cow-bell sang.

The new customer sat down at an opposite table with his back to the other wall. He looked in my direction and I thought he nodded slightly, so I nodded back; but he wasn't looking at me by that time. This young stranger was about thirty and he had the longest, brownest face I ever saw. His round gray eyes were restless and kept drifting—just one jump ahead of you, it seemed. He was smooth-shaven and had a lengthy wooden-looking chin, and he wore a gray coat and dark pants with stitched leather boots underneath. He had small blunt spurs on his boots.

Over by the counter the proprietor said in his buttery nasal voice: "Annie, you get yourself a tray and some drinking water, and go wait on the gentleman."

He moved aside slightly when she edged past him behind the counter, but he didn't move far enough. I saw the girl pull herself away. She went to a dingy corner where there were a wash-basin and some hooks; she took off her hat and veil and jacket and the other glove. She looked doubtfully at the shelf, and then

spread a newspaper to hold her reticule and her other things.

"Isn't there an apron?"

"No, I hain't got no clean ones."

"I've got to use something," and she went into the kitchen. How she found a clean towel I don't know, but she came back with the towel pinned to cover the front of her skirt and the white shirtwaist she wore. The proprietor's eyes kept rubbing her.

Annie Lingen walked over to the man who had just come in, and took his order. He spoke with a voice so low and smooth that I couldn't hear him across the room. After Annie had returned to the kitchen, the man got up deliberately and moved into another chair at the same table, facing the rear—the better to watch her, probably. She was worth watching and no mistake. That was the reason I kept dawdling with my last half-of-a-peach and the vilest coffee I ever tasted.

A smell of ham and eggs frying; the proprietor kept going back into the kitchen to give the girl directions. . . . Once he came out with his face red and mad. He leaned by the counter, drumming his fingers on the wood. After quite a while the girl reappeared bearing a heavy tray loaded with food and coffee.

While she was busy in the kitchen I had been studying the customer across the room. The way he was sitting, his coat fell wide; he wore his gun on the left side, and it was a mighty big gun for such a small holster. He must be left-handed, I thought, because the revolver butt pointed toward the rear. The butt and hammer and most of the trigger-guard stood well out of the scorched red holster, and at the lower end

the barrel protruded for a good three inches. About a .44 Smith & Wesson, I thought; but I couldn't understand why the holster was so small, or the peculiar way in which it dangled from the cartridge belt.

Annie started along behind the counter, heading toward the open room. The proprietor was still there for her to crowd past. One of his hands was hidden. I couldn't see exactly what happened.

All I know is that Annie Lingen took three or four quick steps, and then whirled. She put the tray on the counter with a crash.

Her face was blazing yellow. She picked up the thick cup of coffee and hurled it.

The proprietor threw up his hands in time to ward off the cup, but he couldn't miss the coffee. With a fury that took my breath away, the girl caught the metal tray and swung it toward the big man. Eggs, creamed corn—the whole mess struck him across the face and shoulders, and you couldn't hear anything that Annie Lingen was saying above the smash and roll of dishes.

Which was just as well, perhaps. As soon as her voice was recognizable the words she spoke were recognizable, too, and they weren't pretty. I was so amazed that I couldn't move. The proprietor gagged and sputtered.

Annie Lingen snatched off her towel and wiped her hands. She strode back to the corner and took her things from the shelf, and began to struggle into her jacket. "Just remember that," she cried in her high-pitched voice, "the next time some poor girl comes in here and tries to work for you—tries to earn a meal because she's hungry——"

She hurried toward the front door. The proprietor had winked the coffee out of his eyes, and he came panting after her. "You little devil," he howled. "I'll break your nose!"

A quiet voice spoke: "Oh, Kite."

It was the tan-faced man across the room. He had pushed back his chair and was standing.

"You saw her do it!" Kite babbled.

"Stop where you be."

Annie went out of the front door and slammed it so hard that the cow-bell fell off.

"It's none of your damn business," shouted Kite. "I'm going to have that woman arrested!"

"Kite," said the young fellow, "if a lady throws victuals and coffee on a man, I reckon she has got good reason."

He took his flat-crowned black hat and walked to the street. I saw him looking this way and that. Then he dropped easily off the high sidewalk, jerked out the halter-knot, and climbed into his buggy. He drove away. The buggy box was bright and shiny, but the wheels had been in deep mud.

I got up and reached for my own hat, and for my coat and bundle. Kite was still trying to clean the mess from his face and clothing, but his hands shook so that he could scarcely manage it. . . . Finally he dropped my change on the counter and said something about wanting me for a witness: he was going to have that woman arrested.

"Better not," I advised, and then I went out and tried to find her. That part about a girl being hungry was more than I could take, but now I couldn't find her anywhere.

4

IT SEEMED TO ME THAT ANY TRAVELER LOOKING for work might very well go into a barber shop if he had a few spare nickels in his jeans. His improved appearance might help him in getting a job. . . . I decided that I could chance it, and promptly got a middling good shave in a shop across the way. There was only one loafer in the place to help conversation along. But finally I got the barber and the loafer to talking about white-hooded train robbers without seeming to open the subject myself.

They informed me that the railroad's metal money box—carried off by the bandits—was found eventually on the prairie, eight miles west of Eagle Hill. It had been blown open with dynamite, and there were many fragments of greenbacks caught in the prairie grass; so some of the money had been destroyed in the explosion.

That led to talk about Sound Currency and the death of McKinley, and what kind of a president young Teddy Roosevelt would make. I said that I didn't care what kind he made, so long as I got myself a job and three square meals a day.

The barber and the loafer discouraged me a good

deal: they said a carpenter would starve to death in Pahoka City these days. I asked where I could get a drink, and they recommended Cookson's Bar. It was on the west side of the street, about eight doors north of Kite's Cafe.

Halfway across the dusty road I waited for a horse and rider to pass me. It looked like they raised an awful lot of buckskins in that region. For a moment I thought it was the same horse I had seen hitched to the muddy-wheeled buggy in front of Kite's, but this buckskin pony was a good hand shorter and not much more than a colt. The rider cantered past, not seeming to look at me—a round-shouldered fellow about twenty-four with a thin face and small chin, and little brown ferret-tails of mustache hanging from his lip.

At Cookson's Bar the front doors were closed, though some rear windows stood open. I went inside and up to the bar. The room was quite dark and it took a few moments for my eyes to become adjusted to the dimness. The bartender was a sad little man with soiled silk sleeve-holders above his elbows. I asked for draught beer but he said that they only had the bottled kind. He opened my bottle and it was too warm: half the beer foamed out over the polished wood.

Now that my eyes were used to the comparative gloom in this saloon, I could examine the other patrons. There were two, and they sat at one of the round tables with the owner—who, of course, was Charley Tatum, the man I had seen on horseback when I was with the old photographer.

One of the customers was a cattleman I had noticed getting off the train that day, and the other was the

sheriff of Bush County; I had never seen him before, but I knew in advance that his name was Sperry Cantwell. He wore a shabby tan coat and new blue overalls underneath; he had his badge on his coat. He was a disagreeable looking fellow with Japanesey eyes and a bald head shaped like a bean.

Charley Tatum was dealing blackjack. Chips stood in a rack near by but they weren't using chips. They played with currency, betting two or three dollars, or as much as five or ten, on each hand. I had left my bundle on the floor at the front end of the bar, and pretty soon I strolled over, sloshing the last of my beer in the tall glass, to stand in silence and watch the game.

They looked up. Sheriff Cantwell and the cattleman nodded, and I don't think the latter recognized me as the bum who was at the depot. For a while I didn't think that Charley Tatum recognized me either. But pretty soon he said, without looking up: "Find any carpentering work?"

"No."

"You won't, smarty," and he went on dealing.

I went back to the bar and ordered another beer, asking the bartender if he would try to find a cold bottle this time. Tatum quit dealing, and sat watching me for a full five seconds, and then started to handle his cards again.

I made a personally conducted tour of the place. There were some mechanical gambling devices—slot machines, catch-dimes and catch-nickels—none of them appearing to be in very good shape.

At one side of the rear wall was a door with a spatterwork sign that said, "Moving Pictures." That

door led to a small dim room where there were more card tables, and a scatter of dirty cards on the floor, and empty liquor boxes in the corner, and a row of penny-arcade motion picture devices—except that these worked for nickels. The titles above the peep-holes were: "The Artist's Model," "In the Harem," "Honeymoon in Paris" and similar subjects. I dropped in a nickel, and looked at "Honeymoon in Paris," but that was enough to hold anyone.

While I was in the picture room I heard the front door open and close. I sauntered out to find a new customer—the young man I had seen cantering along on the buckskin pony. He seemed even taller when you saw him walking. Doubtless it was because of his long legs, which were bowed and as skinny as a grasshopper's; he wore his trousers tucked inside his riding boots.

He had just bought a plug of tobacco at the bar. I watched him roll up the metal foil which had been around the tobacco; he rolled it into a little ball, and then he tossed the ball easily toward an enormous brass spittoon which stood at the farther end of the bar. He was either awfully deft or awfully lucky: that ball dropped directly into the maw of the spittoon without even touching the sides. It rang and splashed, and the card players looked up at the sound.

The bartender smiled wanly. It seemed that he liked this young man, but I saw him throw a swift glance toward Mr. Tatum as he spoke. "Pretty good, Violet," said the bartender.

"I never miss," said Violet.

"Five dollars says you can't do it again, first try!"

called the cattleman, who apparently had seen the feat.

Violet said, "I'll take that, mister." His voice reminded me of another voice I had heard somewhere; and so did Violet's eyes remind me of other eyes that moved humorously and lightly—gray eyes ever flitting and ever nervous.

The cattleman waved a five-dollar bill. The young fellow named Violet (that name was weird enough, I thought) reached into his breeches pocket and brought out a bag of Indian manufacture. He shook out bills and silver and pennies, and selected his money from the crumple spread on his long, thin palm. He walked over to the card table, and the old cattleman chuckled and said that the money was as good as his.

"For God's sake," cried Charley Tatum, "play cards, Prescott!"

"Hit me," said old Prescott, looking at the two cards just dealt him. Then, to Cantwell, "You hold stakes, Sheriff. Young Goss is going to make me a present of a shinplaster."

Violet said, "No, I'm not." He went back to the bar, and the bartender dug around on the shelves until he found another scrap of foil the same size.

The card players all watched, even Charley Tatum. The young fellow wadded the silver stuff in his hand; and, standing just where he had stood before, he tossed the ball in precisely the same manner with precisely the same result. Prescott hooted and slapped his hand on the table, but the sheriff and Tatum looked annoyed.

"You're mighty cute, ain't you?" said Sheriff Cantwell, when young Violet Goss came to collect.

Violet laughed and winked at me. He didn't say anything: just put the money carefully into his Indian bag and went over and bought himself a drink. Live Oak whisky—he bought that. He took the glass and started wandering, much as I had done before. I sat at the table next to the card players, and alternately watched their game and observed the round-shouldered youth in his strollings.

He went into the moving picture room eventually, and the mechanism buzzed. When he came out his face was red. "Why," he called, "that's downright dirty and indecent!"

"No Minors Allowed, smarty," said big Charley Tatum.

"I'm no minor, Tatum. I'm twenty-five, but I don't approve of such pictures."

The sheriff asked him, without turning: "Then why look at them?"

"I don't know," drawled Violet. "I just didn't have nothing else to do at the moment."

Old Prescott invited him, "You can play blackjack, if you've recently dug up any more gold on your land."

"Gold on his land!" exclaimed Tatum derisively.

"Well," said old Prescott, "that is what folks say. How about it, Goss?"

The youth moved forward and watched the game for a time.

"That's what folks say," he repeated dreamily. "All right, Mr. Tatum, deal me in."

"Get your bet out."

Violet opened his money pouch, and I saw him

count out fifty dollars. The other men watched him closely.

"You can't bet all that at once," Tatum told him. "There's a ten-dollar limit."

"Then I'll bet ten dollars," and he put the money down.

I pushed nearer in order to watch. Violet Goss seated himself at Tatum's right, and Sperry Cantwell and the cattleman were over across the big table. The cards flipped out smoothly and regularly. Charley Tatum turned a nine-spot.

"Hit me," said old Prescott, and Tatum broke him.

Sperry Cantwell put his money on his cards. Tatum looked at Goss.

"Can I split?" asked Goss mildly.

"Yes," said Tatum, "but not aces."

Violet split his hand, and put down another ten-dollar bill and Tatum gave him two more down cards. Violet split again, and bet another ten. He looked at his one complete hand. "This is good," he said. "Now, down on these other two."

A child could have told what was happening, without even seeing those cards. He had picture cards, or something just as good; he had been paired and then tripled; otherwise he would have stayed the way he was. . . . Charley Tatum was going to lose, and I could see that he was a rotten loser. His face was sal-low. Violet Goss looked at his second hand and put the ten-dollar bill on top. He slid his fingers toward the third hand. He was just going to look when a card flipped toward him, face up. It was a six-spot.

"I don't want that card," said Violet. "I didn't ask you to hit me."

"You signaled for a hit. You wiggled your fingers."

"The hell I did."

"The hell you didn't!" shouted Charley Tatum at the top of his voice.

Violet's eyes were peculiarly wan and steady. He made a motion as if to shove his chair back and stand up. He didn't get to do it. Tatum had hooked his boot around the lower rung of Goss' chair, and he jerked his foot for all he was worth. The chair legs flew up and Violet went over backward with a crash. His head sounded like a rock when it struck the floor.

Prescott and Sheriff Cantwell both jumped up. I think old Prescott was appalled, but Cantwell took his cue from Charley Tatum. In later moments I was vaguely aware that I had heard the front door open, but I didn't take my eyes off Violet Goss. He lay with shoulders planted on the broken chair-staves; he was moving his head, trying to get his senses back.

"What'd that young bastard try to hand you, Charley?" demanded Cantwell.

"Tried to cheat me, that's all," bellowed Tatum. "So he throws things in the goboorn, does he? So he's smart as tricks, is he? Why, by God, I ought to——"

"If I was you," cried Cantwell shrilly, "I would empty that goboorn on him, right where he lays!"

Tatum yelled. "Empty it, hell, I'll crack his dome with it!" He swung around, leaped to his feet and started forward, reaching out his hand.

For just one second I couldn't believe it; then I realized that he meant business. He was actually going to pick up that heavy brass spittoon and crack it against the head of the boy on the floor.

Since Tatum had set the precedent of using his feet,

I thought I would use mine. I put my leg out and tripped him as he plunged past. He sprawled for a few paces, waving his arms, to try to catch his balance, and bringing up on his knees in front of the bar.

He arose and turned slowly. One trouser-leg was torn open at the knee and I could see the hairy skin underneath; I could even see, for all the dimness of that room, the globules of blood standing out instantaneously on the raw flesh.

Tatum looked at me with disbelief. Then he gasped, and ripped his hand toward the side pocket of his coat. My own gun was in my bundle at the bar. Probably I was foolish not to be wearing it, but I had never dreamed of needing it at that stage of the game.

Charley Tatum didn't quite get his hand into his pocket. A man spoke from the front of the room . . . the same tone in which he had said, "Oh, Kite," a couple of hours before. That was his way of doing: just speak a man's name, and stop him in his tracks.

It was the young man who had come in, hoping to eat in Kite's Cafe, and whose dinner had been spilled all over Mr. Kite by Annie Lingen. At last I understood about that peculiar holster of his. He didn't have his gun out, but he was covering Charley Tatum just the same.

The folds of his coat were pushed back and his left hand had grown around the revolver butt; his finger was inside the trigger-guard. That holster was fastened on a long smooth rivet—a kind of swivel—and apparently the man always used his gun that way. He could turn the holster up or down, in any position he wanted to.

In all this frenzy, I couldn't help wondering whether he could really hit anything that way.

Apparently Charley Tatum thought that he could, for he held his hands high and backed against the bar.

"Mister," the man with the gun directed me, "get that revolver out of Tatum's pocket, and put it amongst those bottles back of the bar, so he'll find it when he has need. I don't think he has got need right now."

I did as I was told. When I had turned around, Violet Goss was on his feet. He kept pressing his eyes shut and shaking his head. He was still dizzy.

None of the other men made a motion. The bartender was frozen, ten feet away, up where the cigars were; old Prescott stood with thumbs in his vest pockets, watching. The sheriff looked as if he had no desire to fight and die for Charley Tatum.

Tatum lowered his hands a little and then brought them up when the man by the door looked at him again. "All right," Tatum said, heavily. "You Goss boys go ahead and get out, and don't you come in here again. Not while I own this bar. I've had all the trouble I want out of you."

The man with the gun looked at his brother. "Get your money off that table, Vi."

"This much is mine," said Violet, and put fifty dollars in his pocket.

I spoke up and said: "I think you won three hands that you were playing. Ten dollars on each—including that one with the six-spot that he gave you and that you didn't ask for."

Violet Goss said coldly, "I guess that is right, mister. . . . Just a second. Let's see . . . I got cold

turkey on this, and cold turkey on this, and nineteen on this. Wait'll I look at his hand and see whether he would take a hit . . . No, he's got nineteen; he wouldn't hit. We push on one, and I win two."

"Then take your money out of his pile, Vi," said his brother, and Violet counted twenty dollars from Tatum's stack of bills.

Sperry Cantwell growled, "That's robbery. Burglary."

I told him, "No, it isn't. I'll stand witness to that. We call it blackjack, where I come from."

"And where's that?" asked Charley Tatum.

"All over," I said, and went around the end of the bar and picked up my bundle.

"Cotton," said Violet Goss, moving to the front of the room, "did you pick up Muddy's lamp at the express office?"

Cotton Goss dropped his hand from his gun and the holster turned down and pointed at the floor again. Charley Tatum lowered his hands. He stood, broad and heavy against the bar, watching the Goss boys with purest hatred.

"No, Vi," said Cotton. "I didn't pick up the lamp yet, but I drove the buggy in for that purpose."

They gestured for me to come with them, so I followed them outside and walked down the street. Violet unhitched his pony. He kept the rein in his hand, and the pony came walking beside us outside the hitch-rails.

Cotton smiled at me. His face, as I have said, was almost grotesquely long; but he could smile with rare beauty.

When we reached the place where Cotton had left

his horse and buggy, we had a few moments' conversation. The Goss brothers spoke with rare feeling about Charley Tatum and what had happened in the bar. They swore seriously and calmly, with astonishing fluency.

I was to find that this was a habit they practiced by themselves; in some strange fashion it accounted for the cleanliness of their talk when they were with women or strangers or with people whom they did not like. To be admitted to a swearing bout by the Goss boys was a rare privilege; it marked one's acceptance by them.

Cotton wanted to know why I had tripped Tatum when he went after the spittoon.

"I don't know. I didn't like him."

"A lot of folks don't, but a lot of folks wouldn't have tripped him. And you without any gun."

I shrugged. . . . Their eyes examined me as I waited by the wheel; then the boys asked if I would tell them something about myself. I gave the name of Rich Williams again. When I told about being kicked off the freight, I was sure that Cotton had already heard that story somewhere in town.

"I'm looking for work. Maybe I can get on the next train late tonight."

"You got any money?" asked Violet.

"Not much to spare."

The brothers glanced at each other once more, and some understanding passed between them. Cotton looked down at me; he was a head taller than I. "Would a place to sleep and feed suit you for a while, even if there wasn't much work attached to it?"

I told him that I guessed that would suit anyone.

"My name is Goss," he said. "The first name is Cottonwood. This here is my brother Violet. We got a place out on Evening."

"Where's that?"

"Evening Creek. It's an easy hour's ride and a little more, west on the prairie. We got a package to pick up at the express office, so come with me in the buggy."

We rocked away, with the late afternoon sunshine seeming cool on our cheeks. Violet cantered ahead on his smaller buckskin pony; the shadows of horse and rider were dancing and blue-brown as they traveled beyond us.

I asked about the buckskins. Cotton said that they weren't out of the same mare—they were bought from different people—but he and his brother had always fancied buckskins and they had two more at home.

When we reached the depot we found Violet standing outside the agent's window with his head cocked toward the open door. There were voices sounding inside. Violet pushed up his thin arching brows when he saw us; he nodded toward the door, and Cotton and I stopped to listen.

Immediately we recognized the voice. It was Annie Lingen's voice, and she was giving the agent and the entire S. C. & W. particular fits.

"I don't see why I can't!" she scolded. "I won't hurt their dirty old station. You can lock up the office. . . . What do you think I'm going to do—steal your tickets?"

"Lady," cried the old agent desperately, "I ain't allowed to do it."

She screamed: "And you a nice looking man with maybe daughters of your own! How would you feel," she wailed, "if one of your daughters didn't have more than enough for a ticket back to St. Louis—not even enough extra to buy a square meal—and some dirty old agent wouldn't let her sleep in his station to wait for the morning train?"

The man cried, "I ain't got any daughters, thanks be."

"All right." The girl's voice soared. "I'll sleep in the streets of Pahoka City! A fine advertisement for your fair city, Mister Agent: an innocent young woman turned out into the streets—maybe to starve and catch cold—maybe to lead an immoral life—"

Violet's grin had given way to amazement, but Cotton winked at me and began to laugh. He led the way inside. We found the agent shaking with rage, and Annie Lingen—remarkably pretty even in her fury—with little valise in hand.

"What's this about leading an immoral life, miss?" Cotton wanted to know.

The girl's green eyes flashed, dark and wild. "Don't you go to insulting me."

"Miss, don't you remember me? You up-ended my dinner all over old Cal Kite. Reckon you owe me an apology."

She tossed her head and said that she never apologized—not to anyone. She said that she never had need to make an apology.

"Oh, go on," said Cotton graciously. "I stopped Kite when he was heading after you."

The chalk went out of her smooth face; she looked at us with less rancor.

I plucked up courage. "Remember me?"

"Yes. You helped me off the train. But you're just a hobo."

Both Goss boys laughed delightedly at this and nudged me, considering it a great joke. I had the jealous realization that this girl's charm had captured them immediately; I wasn't the only one who might admire her pretty shape and swagger, who might feel her madcap and tousled power.

She began to talk rapidly. She had come to Pahoka City expecting to find her aunt and uncle, but they were gone for good. She had spent the afternoon searching for employment without success. Then she had dragged her suitcase of clothing and other feminine fripperies to a variety store up the street (a long haul, I thought, for such a slim girl) and she had persuaded the storekeeper to buy these possessions of hers. He gave her barely enough money to take her back to St. Louis. She had no money for the hotel; there was no passenger train bound northeast until morning.

"What will you do when you get back to St. Louis?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"You got any folks there?"

"Not any more, mister. My Pop was buried last Tuesday."

The Goss brothers nodded, and I could guess what was going on in their minds.

"Well," said Cotton, "I guess the Goss Hotel has got another boarder."

Annie Lingen's face was eager. "What do you mean by that?"

Violet twisted his rat-tail mustache and replied, "Our mother lives with us at our place out here on Evening Creek, and it would be all right for you to come with us. Maybe in a day or so you can get some track of your uncle—find out where he's gone, maybe."

She shook her head. "My uncle's gone for good. Vanished forever." The girl's bright eyes moved in turn over each face before her. I was thirty-four years old, but I know that my hands were sticky and clenched as I felt the intensity of her gaze.

"All right," she said. "I like you. I like all of you. I'll go."

5

THE AGENT HAD BEEN PERPLEXED AND MUMBLING, but now he called in some alarm: "Look here, girl! You don't know these men, do you?"

Annie's head turned on her lithe neck. "Do you?"

"Sure I do," cried the agent, backing off a little. He pointed at the brothers. "Them two are the Goss boys—Cot and Violet. They're shooters, lady; they pack weapons; they've killed men in these parts. Cotton's killed two, and Vi's killed one."

Cotton's smooth face looked hurt and troubled. "It was the other way around," he corrected the old man. "I got one. And Vi, here, he got the two."

"They have a mother, haven't they?" demanded Annie Lingen shrilly. "A mother who lives with them?"

The agent stammered, "Oh yes, they got quite a mother."

"Then pooh for your advice, and I'll go with them! You wouldn't let me sleep in your station; I think you're a mean, snarly, smelly, evil old man!"

"More or less, ma'am," agreed Cotton, amiably. "More or less." To the beleaguered agent he said,

"Jeffson, I reckon we got an express package here. It's Muddy's lamp that she's been pining for."

"Express agent ain't here now."

"You always have the keys when he ain't," ordered Cotton. "Trot them out."

Violet took Annie Lingen's valise and we escorted her down the platform. Cotton went to the express shed with the growling agent; presently he joined us, straining under the weight of a wooden box. I helped him to place this carefully in the back end of the buggy. He went around to unhitch the horse and I was able to help Annie into the buggy. I saw her leg and petticoat again and they were just as beautiful as ever.

Violet swung one of his grasshopper legs over the polished saddle on his colt; he must have whispered to the animal, must have given it some sort of signal. The pony lifted up its forelegs and danced beautifully, with Violet forcing his boots hard into the hooded stirrups, and snatching off his black hat to wave at us. If he had a headache from that fuss in the saloon you would never know it now. He was showing off for a pretty girl, and both of them enjoyed it.

Cotton observed his brother's performance with admiration. "That's high-schooling, all right," he said.

He didn't at once turn into the road that toiled west over the prairie. Instead we drove up to the stores again with the pale sunset around us.

"Whereabouts did you sell your stuff, lady?"

"Over there." She pointed. "'The Racket Store.' Where it says Notions and Second Hand."

There was a light in the Racket Store, and Cotton stopped his buggy in front. Violet had ridden ahead,

but he loped back and was on the ground in a moment.

"How much did he pay you, Miss—?"

"Annie. Annie Lingen."

"How much did he pay you, Annie?" asked Cotton.

She opened her battered reticule and produced a pathetic roll of bills. Cotton took the money and went into the second-hand store with Violet and myself close behind.

The bewhiskered proprietor had Annie Lingen's things spread over the counter under the kerosene ceiling-lamp. He seemed to be appraising them still, perhaps planning to whom he might sell them.

"The lady don't want to sell after all, Ole," Cotton said. "Here's your money back. We'll take her things."

Ole cried, "I bought these things! I bought them fair, and now they are mine."

"No, they ain't," said Violet. "I reckon some of those things are keepsakes. Like this," and he touched a gilt daguerreotype frame.

The storekeeper made a sour face. He began to pack the clothing and other articles into the old extension-case. We tried to help, our hands fumbling with shabby silk fabrics, with objects we were not used to fingering. I think we all felt a strange and intimate embarrassment; but I recall that there were no silk stockings in the lot, and no Irish lace half so fine as that which I had already seen. Annie had worn her best for her trip to Pahoka City.

"Is that everything? You sure you got everything, Ole?"

"Everything," repeated the storekeeper. "Maybe

you cut my throat if I don't put in everything."

Cotton and I buckled the straps of the case, and Vi brought out his money bag. He handed over a crumple of green paper. "Here's five dollars for your trouble, Ole. I reckon we wouldn't cut your throat. We ain't in such business."

We returned to the darkening street. We rode west through the marvel of the prairie: Cotton, Annie and I, pressed together in the buggy, with Annie's baggage balanced precariously on the shipping-box in the rear. Violet rode his pony ahead, or alongside when the width of the road permitted.

It was almost more than eager flesh could bear—to be squeezed close to the warm softness, the electric and provocative substance that was Annie Lingen. Cotton and I were suffering together; neither of us could reply in more than monosyllables to the girl's nervous chatter.

The empty land darkened. The endless night was a lake around us, and away in the north we heard two coyotes that sounded like a dozen. When the road narrowed, when we were swallowed in dry brown darkness with only the chop of hoofs and jolting of wheels to keep us company, the voice of Violet Goss came sighing back from the gloom ahead.

He was daring to sing a song for the girl who had come with us—a tender old song. He sang high in his mouth, like most westerners. His voice was round and smooth; the words strung leanly together, joined with a humming . . . *never hear thy winning voice again? When the springtime comes, gentle Annie, when the wildflowers are scattered o'er the plain.* . . . He sang on and on.

THE NIGHT KEPT SWELLING THICKER AND DARKER. As it saturated the prairie with loneliness, as it oppressed the barking dogs at isolated farm houses and soddies with melancholy beauty—as it walked the ridges, or lay winding in flat lands between—so it affected me with uncertainty and a species of solitary fear.

A man cannot remain forever excited by his nearness to a woman who has provoked him with her charm; the life of that provocation must be fed to be prolonged. It couldn't be fed very well in this case by any gesture of romance—not when we were strangers, not when we rode three in a buggy with Violet Goss singing ahead.

Violet dared not sing about Gentle Annie forever; he drifted off into a cowboy song of which he seemed to know only the chorus.

About this time Cotton spoke up. "I'm sorry, lady. You never got anything to eat in Pahoka."

That was the way they spoke of the town, commonly. It was Pahoka City, but folks referred to it ordinarily as Pahoka or maybe just The City.

"It's all right," said Annie Lingen. "I'm not hungry—not a lot, I mean."

Both Cotton and I told her that we had been fascinated by her attack on Cal Kite in prompt retaliation for his insult; we said that we had followed her out of the restaurant, hoping to help if we could.

"I knew I would cry," she said, "if I kept walking down that street again. I thought I would go into the stores next door and ask for work. I tried, but they didn't want anybody."

Cotton asked: "Is your name Annie Lincoln?"

"It sounds like that, doesn't it? It's Lingen—it's a Nordsky name. My pop was a Nordsky. I guess in the Old Country they used to spell it with a 'y' instead of an 'i'."

I told her that she didn't look the least bit Norwegian.

"I know," said Annie. "Irish as Paddy's pig. My mother's name was Hanrahan, and she was Irish on both sides."

Cotton's thoughts were still fixed on something to eat. "Don't you worry. Muddy will fix supper, soon as we get out to our place."

"Is Muddy your mother?"

". . . I guess it started when Vi and me were little. No, I guess it started when there was only me. I couldn't say Mother; just said Muddy. The name hung on, kind of. We just call her Mud or Muddy."

"Father dead?" I wanted to know.

The wheels turned; the buggy bumped along for half a minute before Cotton replied, "Yes, he's dead." I wondered whether there had been anything odd

about the death of the elder Goss. I kept my wonderings to myself.

Along with everything else I had to keep. My real name; why I was in Pahoka City; and just why I had waited for that train in Portersville and climbed upon the blind baggage by prearrangement with the S. C. & W. The sternness and demands of my occupation were upsetting in this moment, as I recognized them.

Most of the time I had been a desperately lonely man, and now it seemed pleasing to meet people as appealing and unique as the Goss boys. I was delighted that I had used my foot in time to trip Charley Tatum on his errand after the spittoon. I looked forward to taking the case off these Goss boys—exposing their works, so to speak, and seeing just how their balance wheel conducted itself.

I won't tell everything I was thinking about Annie Lingen. I repeat: I was young, and there was a physical storm within her, and one could feel it when she was near.

But night and space afflicted me. The feet of two horses echoed loose and spectral in the rough road . . . amid the sound of wheels and hoofs I was reminded again of the job I had to do.

Somewhere, put away, there is a picture of myself taken the year before this happened. It is the stern face of a taciturn young man who looks as if he had been breaking rocks, instead of living, for his third-of-a-century. The eyes are cold and deep-set; the grimness of ancestral inheritance stands out in the thick upper lip, the unrelenting chin, and ugly cheekbones. It is a dour face with corners on it; it looks as if many gen-

erations of old Scotsmen and Englishmen and Welshmen had conspired to produce it.

I didn't think much of that face. Right then I should have been surprised out of my seat in the buggy, if I had thought that Annie Lingen might ever really care for it either. . . . I had seen only her fury and her beauty and her childishness. I had not guessed at the liberality of her affection which would soon enfold us all.

BEFORE WE REACHED EVENING CREEK WE turned north on a narrow road that had been made chiefly by Goss hoofs and Goss wheels and not by the hoofs and wheels of many visitors. While we were jolting through a tiny gully—a branch of Evening Creek in wetter weather—the crazy notion assailed me that perhaps the Goss boys were bandits themselves, and that they had guessed through some miraculous means just who I was, and that they were taking me to this isolated spot to murder me. With similar foolishness I imagined that they would seize poor Annie Lingen and use her for foul purposes.

The notion struck me with such force that I had to chuckle. Cotton turned in the dark. "Yes," he said, as if I had asked a question, "we're home."

We crossed a flat rib of prairie and saw a light. Violet was ahead of us, swinging from his horse in the door-yard when we got there; the open door and windows of the little house were pale with lamp-light, and a collie dog was bounding and wriggling after Violet. We stopped; immediately the collie was dancing

around the buggy—a delighted tan-and-white shape capering in the dimness.

I saw machinery: I didn't know what kind, except that it was big and rusty and had a lot of cables. I wondered what the Goss boys were doing with all that machinery in their yard. Once out of the buggy, I turned to help Annie down, but Violet was there ahead of me.

He swung her to the ground and started toward the porch where someone was standing.

"Violet," a voice inquired, laughing a little in its demand, "you drunk?"

"No," said Cotton, coming behind us. "We aren't drunk, but we got company, Muddy."

"Company!" cried Muddy, wholly delighted at the idea. She seemed about to clap her hands as she retreated into the house; she seemed about to jump up and down, as a child might do for joy.

In a moment we were all standing inside together. Two wall lamps with tin reflectors and one plain table lamp with a smoky chimney offered illumination in that room. I saw yellow-and-brown plaid oilcloth covering tables and shelves; I saw a table with places laid for three, and a big black range with steam piercing up from its kettle lids.

But more importantly than these things I saw the Goss boys' mother; so I remember her now, after forty years, and so I shall always think of her—a short, burly woman smiling with every bulge of her face.

Her body, plump but muscular, was sheathed in an old calico gown—tiny black flowers printed on gray, if I remember—and a checked apron covered the

front. Pounds of coal-black hair streaked with gray were braided and coiled on her head. She had attempted to nail it there with any number of hairpins, but wild locks straggled: a little tail of black thrust out like an eighteenth-century pigtail above her neck. Her brown face had been scorched by wind and plowed by labor, but her wet gray eyes laughed at the ravage around them.

The same eyes she had given to her boys . . . elusive as the flight of pigeons, hunting here and there, dwelling on objects, forming opinions in a flash and flying away again before you might fully snare their glance. The stature of Cotton and Violet was an endowment from the other side of the family; Muddy could have walked under their outstretched arms and could have worn a high hat while doing it. But her eyes were theirs, and so was the infantile gravity or bouncing humor which so often possessed her, and so was the air of quaint secrecy she bore.

She spoke in a little-girl voice, explosively, so that we laughed as she leveled her finger at Annie Lingen.

"Who's that?"

"A lady, Muddy," said Cottonwood.

"Hain't you ever seen a lady before?" Violet wanted to know. "Don't point! That's what you always told me."

"What kind of a lady?" Muddy cried.

"A nice one," said Annie, tossing her head, and we laughed again.

Cotton recited with some gravity, "We met up together in Pahoka this afternoon. She had trouble about lodgings, so we fetched her out."

Muddy demanded of Annie: "Whose girl are you?"

Cotton's or Vi's or"—and her glance floated to me—"or his?"

Annie said, more softly than I might have expected, "I guess I'm nobody's girl. Not right now."

Mrs. Goss cried, "Then you're the girl for me!" and she went over to Annie and patted the girl's elbows with her seamed, agile hands. She held her like that for a moment, forehead close to the young woman's chin and gray eyes peeking impudently at me over Annie's right shoulder.

"Now, who's that?"

The boys lounged behind her, tolerant and amused; Violet took a pickle off the supper table and slid it into his mouth. Cotton stood with hands bent against his hips, enjoying the scene.

He explained, "Vi got into a little trouble at Cookson's Bar and this stranger helped him out."

"A little trouble!" repeated Violet scornfully. He wasn't content with such moderate expressions of his difficulties. "Charley Tatum was going to cave my head in, that's all."

Still Muddy patted Annie Lingen's elbows and still she watched me across the girl's black-jacketed shoulder. Then she threatened me with her finger. "Did you—shoot Charley Tatum?"

"No, ma'am."

"Why not?"

"Your son—Cotton, there—got a gun on him."

Mrs. Goss turned promptly around and slapped Violet's hand as it strayed for another pickle. She drew his face down and kissed him soundly and noisily; then she came over to me. I guess I flushed a little, thinking she was going to kiss me too. But she only

thrust out her palm quickly, as a man might have done, and shook hands. "Anybody that fusses with a Tatum is a friend of mine. You don't appear much older than Cot, but I reckon you are. What's your name, son?"

"Rich Williams."

Annie Lingen paid strict attention when I spoke the words; I realized then that she hadn't heard my name before.

Mrs. Goss smiled at both Annie and me as if we were too satisfactory to be true. "Now we'll all have some supper! Cotton, did you fetch my fresh beefsteak like I desired?"

"Did I ever forget anything you wanted?" He led the way out across the porch, and Violet and I followed him. The collie scampered around, getting under our feet, until the Goss boys drove her off with the most ferocious words and the mildest kind of spanking.

Violet had carried a lamp from the house and he held it while Cotton dragged another box—one I hadn't seen before—from under the buggy seat. The box was crammed with groceries of all descriptions; Cotton must have gone shopping before he came to Cookson's Bar.

"How about that other lamp?" I indicated the big box in the rear.

"We'll leave it for now. She's so excited about company she hasn't thought about her table lamp; we'll tote it inside after supper."

"We will surprise her," said Violet, liking the notion.

Vi took the groceries into the house and I carried

Annie's things as far as the porch, and then joined Cotton at the barn. He had lighted a lantern, and by its light was unharnessing the buckskin while Violet's horse stood waiting with docility.

I unsaddled the colt and Cotton led the animals into the barn.

"Rich," he said, and I jumped a little at the casualness with which he spoke, "you draw the buggy inside here. I couldn't drive in because things were in the way."

There was a wide runway through the center of the building. On one side were several stalls and opposite were a corn-crib and feed chests. The mow lay open, above both sections of the barn. In the dim lantern flare I could see oat straw bulging on one side and hay on the other. "That's prairie hay," said Cotton. "We cut it wild on our own land. It's sweet feed."

There was a cowshed out beyond somewhere; I smelled and heard the cows. I didn't get to explore the place any further, for Violet appeared, warning us to hurry. He helped me to finish rubbing down his colt and he was very particular about the bedding. The Goss boys didn't talk much while we were finishing the chores at the barn. Once Cotton asked Vi how his head felt and Vi said, "Fine," and he cursed Charley Tatum with pungency.

We went up to the house. Water buckets stood ready on the porch and we washed at a bench near the open door. I remember combing my scrawny hair carefully before I stepped inside and saw Muddy turning from the stove to beam through blue smoke of the steak.

There was plenty of steak. It wasn't a thick cut of beef. It was the kind of steak that prairie people ate then, and still eat when they don't butcher their own beef. It was sliced off the round—wide, limp flaps of it—with flour hammered into the flesh before frying. The gravy was so thick you could cut it with a knife; and we had hot boiled potatoes with salt curling on their coats, and a great dish of stewed tomatoes with sugar and bits of bread in them, and now and then an onion.

The baking powder biscuits were brown and hot and there was a harvest of store pickles. I kept thinking of what passed for food at Kite's Cafe, while I ladled the peppery gravy over my bread and potatoes or while my sharp knife bit through the thin tenderness of beef.

It all settled into a pleasant dream . . . this was the most wonderful food in the world. These, I thought, were some of the most wonderful people. . . . Annie Lingen was the most attractive creature who ever passed the salt, or beat Muddy to the draw and dashed to the oven for a fresh supply of biscuits.

A picture worth holding in memory forever: a glow of lamps on the clean oilcloth, the seared granite-ware pot with black coffee pouring from its spout, the taste of homemade caramel cake with a grit of sugar in the generous frosting . . . and more than that: the faces, the smiling pudgy woman with wry mouth and straggling plaits of hair, the brown-cheeked men shoveling down their food, frisking and laughing about nothing. And over all, the hot light that seemed to come from Annie.

On the floor beside us, the pretty collie sniffed and

begged. She was a bitch named Belle, though at first when they addressed the dog I thought it was a male named Bill. This collie was the spoiled darling of the household, and no wonder. She had lamenting eyes, and she displayed that common trick of the successful female who establishes a comfortable situation for herself: she made every man feel that he was the one truly important person in her life.

She would sit beside Violet and mourn at him until he gave her a piece of biscuit with gravy on it, and then she would go around to Muddy. Muddy would become aware of those entreating eyes and the little tremble of the pointed nose; and she would offer the very best bite of steak she had already cut for herself. Then Belle trotted around beside Cotton's chair.

At first he would try to discipline her. He would say that this wasn't any way to bring up a dog: Muddy and Violet spoiled the liver out of Belle, and he certainly was not going to spoil her any more.

He would declaim firmly, "Nothing doing. I won't give you anything, Belle," but she would keep on using her eyes and nose, and every once in a while her furry tail would tremble on the linoleum that was tacked over the floor. At last, while Cotton was talking and laughing about something else, I would notice his hand leave his plate and slip down, and then old Belle would be licking her chops again.

She came to me next, but she didn't have to work very hard on me. I was always a sucker for collies, and the more sinned-against their eyes the better I liked them. Then Belle would go and put her face on Annie Lingen's knee, and anyone might envy her doing it.

I remember how Annie bent down and put her face close to Belle's, and they moaned at each other and had a lot in common. Annie talked baby talk to the dog but somehow it never seemed disgusting to hear her do it. And it was always "poor Belle" and "old Belle," which didn't make sense, since the dog was only about three and as fat as a pumpkin.

She was the same color as a pumpkin, too, with white feet and white belly and throat, a star above her eyes, and a little white ring around her muzzle.

Not yet had I heard her bark; for she knew who was coming when the buggy and horses approached, and she had taken Annie and me on sufferance because we were with the Goss boys. But while the other men and I were playing with our second slices of cake Belle rose up and let go a blast that fairly shattered the ceiling. It sounded like all the hound-dog baying and coyote-yapping on the Great Plains, pressed into one enormous peal.

Those Goss boys were at the doors in two jumps—Cotton beside the front door and Violet at the back. I had noticed that Cotton didn't take off his gun and cartridge belt when we sat down to eat; but lots of people never did. And still I hadn't seen what sort of gun Violet was wearing.

"What is it?" cried Annie.

The dog kept bellowing.

"Maybe someone outside," said the mother. She smiled, but her glance wasn't on us when she smiled.

It was funny: the first thing I thought of was my own gun. It was in that bundle I had been carrying when I rode on the train, and there wasn't much else

in there except a shirt and socks and handkerchiefs. Now the bundle lay on the old green sofa, near a bedroom door at the west side of the room.

Without saying anything I got up and went over there. I untied the bundle, brought out my gun and holster, and buckled the belt. I could feel the Goss boys watching me briefly as I did it.

"Shut up, Belle," said Cotton. The collie knew that he meant it, for she subsided after a few explanatory barks.

Cot Goss opened the front door and I followed him out on the low front porch. It wasn't much of a porch—just a step above the ground with a low roof above. It didn't seem queer for Cotton to stand away from the door light as he waited, listening.

"Somebody prowling around here?" I asked casually.

"I don't know."

Violet joined us, coming around the house from the rear where apparently he had listened for a moment without hearing anything more.

Cotton walked into the yard and Vi and I came a step or two behind. We all stopped, and stood with our ears peeled.

Faintly we could hear it: the sound of moving horses—horses that traveled through weeds and over soft soil, but at a considerable distance from us.

"Due west of the cow-shed," whispered Cotton.

"No," Violet said positively, "they're in pastureland over across Evening. They're working south."

"You got any horses turned out there?" I asked, but neither man answered.

Cotton ordered: "Vi, you stay close to hand, while I take Quanah and slip across the creek."

"You stay, and I'll take Tony." Violet made as if to run to the barn but Cotton snatched his coat.

"You're a good smart-aleck rider on that colt of yours," Cot said, "but I don't want those people out there to see anybody. I can go more quiet on Quanah than—"

"And split yourself to the chin," Violet retorted. "No, Mr. Cotton, you're no fancy bareback rider, and you never was."

He ran to the barn on his toes, his limber boots muffling the sound of his haste. A moment later we heard some activity of horses in the stable and Violet's voice, admonishing them. We listened for hoof-beats and soon they came, passing rapidly down a slope behind the barn. There was a faint spatter and spray of water, a rippling of weeds, and then nothing but the eternal silence of Oklahoma—Oklahoma, at night and in its loneliest places.

We strained our hearing to catch the murmur of intruders' hoofs again. The frail wind told us nothing.

Cotton cleared his throat. "I didn't know you had a gun in your bundle, Rich."

"Then you didn't examine it very closely?"

His long face turned in the gloom. "When I ask a man to share my house I don't pry into his personal affairs. Nor his bundles."

"I'm sorry," I said. Then: "A man gets suspicious sometimes. Feels as if every hand were against him."

It was a random stroke, but peculiarly it increased Cotton's confidence in me, and his understanding of

what he thought the situation to be. I heard him chuckle. "I know exactly how you feel, mister."

"I couldn't help putting that gun on, Cotton. The dog barked, and right away you fellows were up and at the doors. I figured maybe you were in trouble."

"Well," said Cotton, "after that row at Cookson's this afternoon I don't much blame you. But you're wrong. We're not in the least bit of trouble. Only we got strangers traveling our land sometimes, and we can't quite identify them."

The door of the house was open and we heard the voices of the women inside. Muddy came and leaned out. "Oh, Violet!"

"Vi's gone, Mud," called Cotton. "He rode out to take a look at the scenery. I tell you, it's the most beautiful scenery above the Cimarron."

"We got better scenery than that, right here in this kitchen," said Muddy, and I heard Annie laugh uneasily at the compliment.

At that moment the dog, Belle, tumbled off the porch and ran toward us through reflected lamplight, head thrown back and muzzle at the sky. She was barking in short, fierce spurts; I thought for a moment that she was making a playful rush at Cotton. Instead she dashed between us into the outer darkness of wheel-tracks and halted, facing south, barking with increasing volume and savagery.

"She's got awfully sharp hearing," I said, "if she can hear anything away out there."

Cot was peering keenly at Belle. "That's the collie of it—a bitch especially . . . Belle has pups every now and then. At those times you can't scratch a

match on our section-posts without having her raise the roof."

Among scrub willows that lined the lane there was a muddle of sound. A horse whinnied; branches crashed as if the animal had danced broadside through saplings. . . . This disturbance occurred less than one hundred yards to the south—probably alongside the little gully which we had crossed on the homeward trip.

Cotton yelled at the dog—telling her to go back to the house—and as he inclined his body beyond me I could see that his left hand had swept his coat aside.

Two shots banged almost together, down in those willows. Then a split-second pause, then a whole tangle of shots from guns of different calibers, biting back and forth in a spasm of flashes. Some of the bullets came our way; I heard them gush overhead.

Cot started along the road at a dead run, and I went with him. He knew the ground and I didn't. The next moment my feet struck a shadow where there should have been solid earth but where there wasn't any. I sprawled flat on my chest; my revolver flew—the gun which I had drawn automatically when the shooting started.

My breath was nearly knocked out by the fall, and I couldn't get up for a moment. I heard a welter of hoofs coming my way . . . they seemed bound to hammer me against the ground, and I lay where I had fallen, trying to press even flatter.

A horse passed with a rush, and the voice of Violet rang out, calling his brother's name. I got up. The buckskin Tony pranced around in weeds at the edge

of the dooryard—it was easy to see the pale mass of him, fluttering and bounding through the darkness. His rider spoke in exasperation, but trying to soothe the animal.

There weren't any more shots from the south, although it seemed to me that I had heard some extra shooting about the time I hit the ground.

I felt among dry grass and stubble, trying to find my gun.

A thin dark specter came back along the lane. It was Cotton.

"What in hell happened?" I demanded.

"I don't know. Where's Vi?"

"Over there by the yard. He's having horse trouble." I got out a match and struck it on my heel. In its flare I caught sight of my revolver lying at what seemed an incredible distance. I picked up the gun, wiped it against my trousers, and followed the Goss boys into their dooryard.

Violet was standing, hanging on to Tony's halter, though the young horse still braced himself nervously and flung out his hind legs every few seconds. Annie Lingen and Muddy hovered on the porch. Perhaps Annie was petrified with fear and astonishment; but Mrs. Goss had brought out a gun of some kind—either a rifle or a shotgun—for now I saw her take it back into the house.

"Fetch a light, Mud," called Violet. "I think he got hit."

I went to the porch and brought the lamp which Muddy offered. The night wind drifted in cool gusts; it rattled the lamp chimney and almost blew out the

flame. With all of us talking to Tony and telling him what a nice colt he was, we finally got his ears forward again and his hoofs on the ground.

"Here it is," said Cotton. "Just a burn on the flank! I don't think it even broke his hide."

Violet examined the short streak amid mustard-colored hair, and he agreed. "Quarter-inch underneath, and it would have opened him wide. . . . Come on, baby boy. Papa'll put you to bed."

By this time the women were back at the house, not asking any questions, and Cotton and I tagged along while Violet led Tony to the stable. He got the horse into his stall, patted him, gave him a nubbin of corn to chew. Then Vi joined us beside the heap of soiled bedding-straw where we waited.

"Well?" asked Cotton.

"There was two of them," said Violet. "I crossed the creek and rode herd on them to the south. I figured they wouldn't see me, for I was on soft ground and Tony didn't make a sound."

"Must have seen you," said Cotton.

"Reckon they did. Maybe we shouldn't be riding buckskins, after all. Anyway, I lost them; couldn't hear their feet and couldn't detect whether they had made it straight on to the main road. When I started toward the dry branch, after fording the creek again, they were laying for me. Might have got me, only one of their horses talked."

Every suspicion which I had felt about the Goss boys was now revived a thousandfold, and so was my perplexity at the calmness of their demeanor. Violet didn't act like a man who had just been at-

tacked murderously by unknown prowlers on his own farm. He seemed, on the contrary, to regard this as a most casual occurrence.

"We heard you shooting back," said Cottonwood.

"Couldn't see much to shoot at. Two men, riding blacks or chestnuts—but I heard something yelp as I was shooting. Couldn't tell whether it was horse or man. When my gun was empty I hit for home."

"Was that when they raked Tony?" demanded Cotton.

Violet muttered, "No, they burnt him first crack out of the box. He was waltzing around on one toe whilst I fired, and he like to have throwed me. I had one arm around his neck."

Cotton said, in deepest disgust, "Then you couldn't have hit the broad side of a barn! And all that talk about hearing somebody yelp is just talk."

"Anyway," said Violet, "I reckon they're halfway back to Pahoka by now," and he went cheerily toward the house.

Cotton moved more slowly in the same direction, and I kept alongside. I asked, "How does he know that those fellows were from Pahoka?"

"He doesn't. He's just guessing."

We heard Violet's boots cross the porch; his voice began explanation and reassurance within the house. Belle came up to us and Cotton bent to pat her. "I suppose you're a-wondering," he said to me.

"I can't be blamed for wondering. Why should folks come on your land, and try to shoot one of you boys when you followed them off?"

He didn't choose to answer this question, so I turned toward the porch.

Cotton put his hand on my sleeve. "Wait a minute. I want to show you something."

He led me across the yard, and stopped beside a tall and unwieldy object. I remembered the rusty machinery which I had glimpsed when first we drove into that yard: framework, wheels and cables.

"Know what this is?"

"No."

"It's a well-digging apparatus."

"Do you dig wells?"

"Used to. Yes, we boys drove down a sight of wells in this country. My father and I had dug wells before we made the Run; and Violet, he was old enough to work at it too."

He continued, "Mister, with this well-digging machinery that we got and everything, the rumor has spread that there is gold here on this land. Well, digging for water is a right tedious job, and sometimes it doesn't pay much, so we haven't sunk any wells for some time. Rumor has it that once we were drilling somewheres around here—maybe practicing, as if we ever did—and we came on a whole lot of gold. Some folks in Pahoka are kind of silly, and they believe it. . . . Maybe that's the reason people are riding around here these days. Maybe they're coming under cover of night, to hunt for the gold mine that we Goss boys have got."

This was reasonable enough on the face of it, but somehow it didn't explain all the powder that had been burned in that near-by willow thicket. . . . I had my badge and credentials in a money-belt inside my clothes, and right now they seemed gnawing a hole through my hide.

Cotton whistled a pleasant Amen to his rambling explanation. "Now we'll go in with Muddy and that pretty girl, and play some jacks."

"You mean blackjack?"

"No, Vi's had enough blackjack to last him for one day. It's just a little childish game that Muddy loves, and she certainly plays the hell out of it."

THE ROOM WHERE WE HAD EATEN AND WHERE our supper had been cooked was the main room of that house, as in the case of most primitive farm dwellings. There was a sink for washing and for kitchen use, and a little yellow-painted pump beside it which brought up spring water from some deep and secret reservoir beneath the soil. The stove was new, so was the linoleum. There were several tables and plenty of plain chairs and two cozy leather-seated rockers; but the old green sofa in the corner looked hard and bumpy.

When Cotton and I reached the house Violet sat at the kitchen table, running a rod through his revolver and wiping the gun with an oily rag. He had a bottle on the oilcloth beside him; I was to learn that the Goss boys had simplified the care of their weapons. They mixed solvent and oil and vaseline together in proper proportions, and thus the one liquid was both a cleaning agent and a lubricant. Since then I have known many owners of guns to employ the same trick, but that was the first time I ever saw it.

Violet had his coat off. His revolver was a .38 Colt and he wore a Miles City holster under his left arm.

Annie Lingen was wide-eyed at this display of artillery; you had to expect that; I was pretty wide-eyed myself.

"This isn't a bit like St. Louis," said Annie.

Cotton sat admiring the lamplight that burnished her hair. "Want to go back to St. Louis right now?" he asked.

"No! Oh no, I like you all too much. Even though I was scared at the shooting."

"Sure you like us?" I asked her.

"Yes, all three. I love Muddy"—and she turned and kissed the dumpy little woman on the back of her thick neck—"and I think you are the three nicest men I ever knew. I guess I love all three of you."

Whatever explanation of the gun-fight had been offered by Violet Goss, it was made before Cotton and I re-entered the room. Annie kept talking about the prowlers as being "burglars." But Muddy referred to them as Forty-niners, which was appropriate enough if you believed that the riders had come searching for gold. I thought that the middle of a black September evening, when you could scarcely see your hand before your face and the weather was still in the dark of the moon, was a mighty bad time to hunt gold anywhere.

However, I locked my doubts up and put them away, and lost myself in the joy of admiring Annie. Seductive as she might be—shaped and intended for man's joy—she seemed also one of the most adaptable creatures on earth.

You would have thought that she had been washing dishes, or wiping them, for ten years in that kitchen. She knew instinctively where dry towels

might be found; and Muddy had only to start a pile of plates or cups on one of the wide shelves when Annie would take her cue and put all the rest in exactly the same place. She was using a big towel made out of an old flour sack, and the dishes she wiped had an extra high gloss.

Cotton got out a pipe and sat smoking, with his boots resting on a spare kitchen chair. He watched Annie with satisfaction. Violet put away his cleaning apparatus and watched her too, but he was chewing tobacco instead of smoking it. I neither smoked nor chewed in those days, so I just watched.

It was a pleasant thing to do: to caress the girl's trim shoulders and rounded hips with your eyes—to admire the grace and speed with which she went about her work (whenever she moved it was with nervous exaltation) or to hear the rustle of her skirts as she went from shelf to sink to stove and back, humming all the time.

Muddy pricked her round little ears. "What's that tune? *Old Dog Tray*?"

"Pop used to sing it." There sounded a quiver in Annie's voice, and she took an unnecessarily long time about putting the sugar bowl on a high shelf. Already she must have told Muddy of her recent bereavement, for Mrs. Goss didn't question her further.

Still, there was something that Annie was bound to tell and we could hear her whisper through the room. "Pop sang it. . . . That kind of song makes you want to cry, but it's— ~~that~~ kind of crying you take joy in—"

Mrs. Goss hung up her clean dishpan, and as she turned she lifted her reedy voice.

*When thoughts recall the past, his eyes are on
me cast;
I know that he feels what my breaking heart
would say.
Although he cannot speak, I'll vainly, vainly
seek—*

Annie joined in; she sang less tremulously than one might have expected. Violet stood up and pretended to lead Cotton and me in the chorus, though we couldn't sing any more than crows.

Violet's high-pitched tenor wound around the chorus and made it his own.

*Old Dog Tray's ever faithful;
Grief cannot drive him away . . .
He's gentle, he is kind; I'll never, never find
A better friend than Old Dog Tray.*

Except that he sang "old dog Belle," as a hymn for his pet. The collie recognized her name and went with Violet as he started toward the sink, still singing. His mother took up the chorus again. . . . Annie Lingen was turned into a pillar of salt, or a pillar of something.

Old Dog Belle's ever faithful. . . . Violet pulled aside a shabby curtain that hung beneath the sink, and disclosed an array of bottles and jugs covering the floor. He selected a jug, and sang his way back to the table.

The room became silent except for echoes and except for Annie's sobbing. She had fled to the farthest corner; she stood with face hidden in her open hands. Her shoulders shook like jelly.

"For God's sake," exclaimed Violet.

It was as if her grief displayed itself too readily, too appropriately. I had my doubts about it from that first moment; though it did seem foolish of Violet and Muddy to go ahead singing *Old Dog Tray*, when the girl had told them that it reminded her of her dead father.

Muddy put her hand on Annie's waist; then she shrugged helplessly, as if she didn't know quite what to do.

Thereupon Cotton arose, put his hot pipe in a saucer, and walked to the corner. He drew Annie away from Mrs. Goss, and slid both of his arms around her. Annie turned and put her face below his neck, and finally she grew more quiet.

Cotton just stood there, not looking at us, not looking at anyone; but both his brown hands were on Annie's back, and sometimes they patted her gently and at other times they were stroking her. Violet and I pretended not to watch but we couldn't help looking. Probably both of us wished that we had had the enterprise to do what Cotton had done.

"Want a drink?" asked Cotton.

"Yes," Annie whispered.

"This is rye," said Violet, bringing glasses from a cupboard. "Fellow makes it over by Oakley. It's agèd. I reckon it's agèd two or three years."

Two or three months, I thought, on tasting it. Annie Lingen strangled over her glass, though she didn't take much. But Muddy led off by pouring out half a tumbler, neat, and drinking it like cider.

"Vi," she ordered, "screw down that wall-lamp. It's a-smoking—enough to fetch tears to anybody's eyes."

Violet obeyed her; then he turned around and began to laugh. "For God's sake," and I knew what he was thinking about. We glanced at Cotton and he nodded.

Vi and I went out through darkness to the barn—he walked ahead because he knew the way.

"Shouldn't have sung that dog song," I told him.

He said, "Annie was humming it first."

We got the heavy box out of the buggy and carried it between us to the house. Violet waited on the porch with a light. He had a chisel and hammer, too, but he made the women stay inside and Muddy couldn't imagine what was happening.

We pried open the lid and got out the table-lamp and assembled it; no part had been broken in shipment. Cotton went around in back and returned with a can of coal-oil. He took a corroded potato off the spout, and while we adjusted the wick in its socket he filled the bowl carefully.

I can see the glory of that lamp before me still: an immense shade of frosted glass, with gilt and red ribbons and a pattern of pale blue grapes entwined; and there were beads to look like grapes, dangling on the base.

"Blow out all the lights in the house," Violet commanded through the door, when we had put a match to this one. Lamp after lamp went out inside. Then in triumph the Goss boys carried the gift to their mother.

A white-yellow circle against the ceiling, and diffused grapes and ribbons coloring all our faces . . . Muddy pressed her worn hands together and squealed again and again. It was the best lamp in Oklahoma

Territory, she said. Her boys were the very best boys any place west of Arkansas, to bring this treasure to her.

We all had another drink and then began to play jacks. It wasn't the jackstone game that children often play, but old-fashioned jackstraws. Cotton and Muddy were the champions. Their hands were steady as niggerhead boulders . . . finally when we tired of jackstraws, Violet got out another game. The game was tiddlywinks, of all things; it was remarkable to watch those long-bodied fellows with the light shining on their loaded guns, flicking little colored wafers into a glass cup with the utmost skill and concentration.

"Yes, Vi," said Muddy. "Old Santy brought those 'winks to you when you was ten or twelve. He brought something to Cotton also, but I can't remember what. And that was all he brought. Those were mighty lean years; it's a wonder Santy brought anything."

Annie Lingen cried, "Lean years aren't any fun."

Violet's roving eyes were suddenly steady, as they had been when he gazed at Charley Tatum across the blackjack table. "Why don't you stay with us a spell, and then you won't have any more lean years?"

"It's a good idea," said Annie.

She slept that night with Muddy in her room, which was the front room at the side. The boys' room was behind; those were all the rooms they had.

"I'm going to give my bed to you," Violet told me, when the women had retired. "Ours are single cot-beds, both of them; so we can't share-and-share."

"No you don't. That sofa is good enough for me," and I pointed.

"I'll sleep on the sofa," said Cotton.

We argued about it. At last I had my way, though they didn't seem to think that it was right for me not to take Violet's bed after what had happened at Cookson's. They brought out more blankets and comforters than I needed, and a hard little pillow that I didn't want because the head of the sofa slanted upwards.

After we had said good night I took off my boots and coat and trousers. I blew out the big lamp, and lay on the couch. I tried to sleep but couldn't. Old Belle kept padding around with her toenails tapping the floor. I thought she wanted to go outside and I opened the door for her once, but she wouldn't go. The boys' door was open; before long one was snoring and the other breathing in sleep.

There came no sound from the room where the women slept. I turned over frequently, readjusting my position, trying to forget about Annie Lingen. The couch was as bumpy as it looked, and the springs squeaked like mice. The room was stuffy.

At last I thought of the barn with its glad air of hay and horses. I gathered up my clothes and took two blankets along. Old Belle wouldn't go. She escorted me politely to the door, and I could see her white-tipped tail waving as I left.

Sock-footed I walked to the barn and felt my way past the buggy, remembering which mow held hay and which held straw. It was straw for me; I had tried hay before. I climbed into the mellow softness, spread my blankets, and saw stars through wide cracks below the eaves.

As long as I couldn't sleep I tried to discipline my thoughts—to keep them away from the girl who attracted me so severely, and to wonder about the Gosses and their manner of living. They seemed to have plenty of money to spend (according to rural western standards) and by their own admission they hadn't done any well-digging for a long time. There might be a lot of cattle feeding over their property, but they hadn't mentioned cattle.

Gold on their land, a voice cried from the boundaries of slumber, and so I went off hunting gold. My dreams were concerned with Mr. Barrow, the photographer, and with a ghostly father of Annie Lingen's who wore a pillow-case over his wicked face with eye-holes cut out, like the bandits who robbed the S. C. & W. . . . Then I mingled with Annie; she was all the women I had ever known or might know; she loved without reason or reluctance; she loved until I couldn't breathe—

This dream was frenzied enough to awaken me, and now the Oklahoma sky was a frenzy, too. I crawled across to a pigeon-hole where I might see the miracle of such a sunrise. Gray, pink, salmon flowing into blue—even pea-green, before the cheery beams washed it out—I saw this happen in the east. I thought, as every man does when such richness is painted before him, that I had never seen anything so overwhelming.

All around the farm, roosters wailed ecstatically about the day. I closed my eyes and relaxed across the clean straw. In a moment I was sleeping; in another moment I had started up in full alarm.

Directly beneath me and outside the barn re-

sounded the most fearful blasphemy and imprecation. I heard every cuss-word I knew, and some new ones . . . I heard the squeak of leather and the sound of moving feet. It wasn't a stretch for me to believe that the most malicious cut-throats swaggered at hand, ready to fire the house and burn any people sleeping in it.

With eyes against the crack I looked down and saw the Goss brothers. They had come out early. They were observing the wild bewilderment of color in the east—they were merely seeing the Sunday sunrise, and remarking upon it. I suppose they could have explained, if pressed, that they were worshiping God in their own way.

THE BOYS CAME INTO THE BARN, BUT I DROPPED flat on the straw and pretended to be asleep, because I wanted to see where Cotton and Violet were going.

They turned the four horses outside and I heard them saddling two of them. They knew I was there, of course. When they first entered the barn, Violet swung up on the wooden ladder which led to the mow; I heard him breathing, and felt him looking at me.

"Reckon that sofa got mighty hard," he whispered to his brother.

"You ought to have made him take your bed."

They rode away. I got up on my haunches, and through a crack I watched the men moving directly toward the scene of the previous night's shooting. There were scrubby trees and bushes at the edge of the yard: these blocked my vision so that I couldn't see the men after they were fifty yards away from the open gate.

I tried to reason things out. Thus far I actually had no more right to suspicion than I had had the previous night. Even if Cotton and Violet were not involved

in some peculiar and predatory activity, it would have been natural for them to investigate the scene of the encounter and perhaps find some clue of importance. I couldn't entertain much suspicion about this errand, so I went back to sleep.

The sun got in my eyes and awakened me for good. I climbed out of the mow and picked off the sharp straws and oat husks which covered the blankets and my clothing. Beyond the rear door of the barn, and across a narrow pasture marked with rain gullies, Evening Creek flowed sandy and shallow and inviting. There, screened by willows, I had a good bath and no one saw me except Quanah and Tony. The Goss brothers had ridden the other two buckskins.

Three cows were pulling half-green fodder out of a feed rack, and every once in a while one of them would moo. They hadn't been milked, and I went up to the house for milk pails. Smoke was coming from the chimney.

Muddy met me at the door, and I had to argue with her before she would let me do the milking. She wanted to treat me like an honored guest or something. She said she did the milking herself, half the time. "The boys are gone," she said.

"I heard them when they rode out, but I was pretty sleepy."

"It's an outrage, Rich, that we couldn't put you up any softer than we did!" Muddy looked bright and excited, as if this Sunday offered great adventure. I found out that she always looked like that—she was always expecting some amusement or some deeper happiness to overwhelm her.

When I kept insisting she said, "Go ahead, then. There's only one cow really fresh, but make sure you milk out the udder on the spotted cow; I don't want her to get caked."

It was a long time since I had done much milking but I managed the best I could, and the cows seemed not too dissatisfied. When I brought the milk back to the house Annie Lingen was up and dressed. . . . She was something to take your breath away, out there on the prairie on that yellow-and-blue September morning.

She wore the black skirt she had worn before, and I wondered if filaments of Irish lace were still clinging underneath. She wore a blue shirt waist. It had been among those things reclaimed at the Racket Store, and thank heaven Ole didn't get that. Around her waist Annie had a glossy belt that made her middle look more slim and beautiful than ever. I don't know what the stuff was, but Muddy was admiring it later and I heard them call it a tucked satin belt.

And there were berry colors in Annie's hair, and it was silly for the Goss boys to miss this. Shamelessly I wished that Muddy had gone away too—off with her boys somewhere, and leaving Annie and me together. I wondered how Annie would like that. Maybe, I feared, she would rather have Cotton.

Salt pork and fried eggs, plenty of them; nothing ever tasted better. As I ate I kept wondering about the boys, and whether they had actually found a spatter of blood off there in those trees, or any other mark which might lure them into riding far on the prairie. It didn't seem in character for me to ask too many

questions; but Annie kept lamenting the boys' departure, and kept going to the door to look for them.

"Shucks," said Muddy, "they're always off on the tear. Greatest folks to be a-riding out you ever saw. When we lived in the hill country—when those boys didn't wear nothing but shirts—they were always wandering some place."

Muddy talked with freedom about the family background and personal history. The father's name was George Goss, and he had ridden with Mosby in Virginia. At the close of the War his hatred for the Yankees was sharpened by the treatment accorded his former commander, and the embittered Mr. Goss refused at first to take the oath of allegiance. He went to Arkansas, where he met Muddy; she was twenty years old at the time, and the daughter of a bona fide Confederate. They lived in the foothills of the Ouachita Mountains, or near them, and both the boys had been born in that wilderness.

Cottonwood was now twenty-nine and Violet twenty-five.

"Yes," Muddy said, "there were two big cottonwoods growing close to our house, and I did love the kind of leaves and upper branches they had. I guess I loved every growing thing that had greenness about it, and I still do. I mind I was laying in bed with my first-born, and the wind brought cotton drifting from those trees. We had an old mosquito bar across the door, and the bar was plastered with that cotton. Then and there I said I would call my baby Cottonwood, because I loved those trees so. I didn't care how much folks laughed at me."

The other baby that came some years later—she

decided it would be a girl. One day, a week before she was brought to bed, she strolled up a ravine behind the house and picked some violets.

"That was a fit name for the child: Violet. I told my man about it, but he just looked down his mouth and said he had been a-plowing, and where was dinner, and those violets I had fotched home weren't even decent garden-sass. Just for that I told him I would name the baby Violet, be it boy or girl."

She said, "I have knowed people who named their children after fighting generals and characters of the past; they take an innocent mite and call him Saul or Samson or Washington. Reckon I had the right to name my own boys after God's growing things, and not be plagued for it."

They owned one of those hideous crayon enlargements—a portrait of George Goss. I gazed at the picture, and wondered at the empty collar with no tie but a very evident collar-button, and I tried to see the Goss boys in that solemn and staring face. It was easy to recognize Cotton's chin . . . Violet's mustache grew just like his father's, though there wasn't so much of it.

But the eyes were rather the solemn and meditative eyes of a lugubrious wanderer—one who loved solitude and its dangers, who brightened at the sound of guns and smell of horses—but who might never master the accumulation of a fistful of money by any means good or bad.

He took his wife and youngsters out beyond the Arkansas River; they lived in Indian land, and were ordered out of it; they ambled for months in a wagon. Sometimes they farmed mean fields where sun and grasshoppers claimed their crops. The boys were man-

grown by the time the Cherokee Strip was opened. They made the Run, and loved to tell about it. But George Goss was shot and killed that same year. There was something unspeakable about his death.

Muddy insisted that the Yankees killed him. (I wondered why she didn't hate me to begin with, for certainly I was a Yankee, and so was Annie Lingen.) The Yankees, Muddy said, were responsible for her husband's death, even though Mosby had put away his revolvers and disbanded his Rangers nearly thirty years before.

"It was my man's arm. If the Yankees hadn't shot him in the arm, he would have been able to get his gun out in time, when he had that trouble eight years ago. His arm was stiff on account of those Yankees."

This was where the narrative stopped, and it was Annie who stopped it: she became too inquisitive. She wanted to know just who had shot George Goss, and why. Muddy's untrammelled eyes flicked past her . . . she started up with a cry—she smelled something burning. There wasn't much on the stove to burn, except grease which always sputtered and smelled when the stove was hot. Muddy didn't want to talk any more; ~~that~~ that was that.

It seemed that there should be other chores needing attention; but with cattle and horses both attended to, I didn't know where to begin. Chickens roved the yard and Annie came out and fed them scraps from the table. I wanted to persuade Annie to go off alone with me somewhere—to take a walk, maybe—but couldn't decide just how to open the subject, and finally lost my nerve. Instead, I walked around the place, looking things over in an idle fashion.

Certainly they didn't do much farming, and I wondered just how these Gosses supported themselves, and I thought of that peculiar story about the gold mine. There was one big field of corn north of the buildings and east of Evening Creek—perhaps enough feed for the stock on the place, but no more than that. A patch of yellow oat-stubble was shining beyond. Elsewhere the natural grass grew rough and wild.

By ten o'clock Cotton and Violet were not yet in sight, though Muddy seemed in no way alarmed. "They'll come, soon as they're hungry enough. They better be hungry too. I promised Violet two chickens for the five of us."

I volunteered to kill the chickens, and from the porch steps Mrs. Goss pointed out two that I should take. I caught them after great difficulty, and cut their heads off with an ax—I never could bear to wring a chicken's neck. I had a little trouble with Belle: she seemed to think that I shouldn't be killing their chickens. Annie and Mrs. Goss performed steamy and smelly rites with hot water in the back yard, and they brought the chickens inside, decently plucked, and gave them a good singeing.

About half an hour later I got the shock of my life. Annie was making stuffing, while Mrs. Goss worked with the chickens. She wanted to stitch the carcasses in order to hold the stuffing inside.

"Rich," Muddy said to me when I came to the kitchen again, "you find me some cotton string. Our hands are all greasy."

"Where do I find it?"

"In the draw." I didn't know the word at first but

soon discovered that she meant "drawer." She pointed it out: the bottom drawer of a battered walnut chest which stood against the wall between those doors leading to the two bedrooms. Muddy said that I would find everything she needed in there; she kept her sewing in that bureau.

A large needle: she said I would find it—and a ball of thin string which she had saved from store packages. I pulled open the drawer, and neither woman was looking at me when I did it. I saw the string first and took it out. I had to hunt for the pincushion containing the big needle—there were rags there, shirts waiting to be mended, socks that needed darning; things like that.

When I raked these articles aside I saw the little white scraps, several of them. In shape they were pointed and elliptical. They were two or three inches long. They were funny scraps to find anywhere.

Well, a child might have made them, hacking at random with a pair of scissors—ruining white linen for no special purpose. On the other hand, someone not a child might have clipped them out too. If you were going to take some pillow-cases and cut eye-holes in them, you would have such wafers of cloth left when you got through.

At that moment Belle began to yelp; Cotton and Vi were riding into the yard. Annie exclaimed eagerly and ran toward the door. I took advantage of the opportunity to stuff a couple of the scraps into my pocket.

"Hurry up there, Rich," said Mrs. Goss. "Can't you find that needle?"

"I found it," I said, and pushed the drawer shut.

BOTH COTTON AND VI LOOKED MIGHTY PLEASED with themselves. They seemed possessed of a secret amusement, and after they came into the house I saw Muddy trying to figure out the secret. But she wasn't going to ask any questions until they gave her the nod, and apparently she couldn't detect any nod. She only popped her chickens into the oven and cried out for more wood to keep the range fire going.

Violet seemed to suffer from inflation of the chest, and I mean that literally. His shirt stuck out in front as if he were carrying something inside; he went to the bedroom immediately, and when he reappeared his chest was flat again.

The finding of those linen fragments had so disconcerted me that for the moment I forgot about Annie. I failed to observe her attitude toward the boys, and whether she welcomed either of them more eagerly than she had welcomed me when first we met that morning.

Little lozenge-shaped scraps of sheeting . . . there wasn't any sense in such relics being kept. You couldn't use bits of cloth like that, not for anything.

I tried to convince myself that there were a thousand and one reasons—innocent reasons—why the cloth should have been in that drawer. But loyalty demanded that I explore the situation as soon as possible; and still there was nothing to do but stay on with the Gosses and Annie, and work the matter out for myself.

I found Cotton splitting pieces from a chunk of oak, at the woodpile beside the path leading to the barn.

"Blood on the ax," said Cotton. "Who killed those chickens—you?"

I nodded. "I suppose there was a lot more I could have done. I milked the cows. . . . I might have brought up some extra wood, but your mother hadn't said she needed any more. You fellows left early, and I couldn't ask you what I was to do."

Cotton kept splitting billets of wood, studying the uneven grain as he sliced each chunk. "Told you there wasn't much farm work, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Well, that still stands."

"It's just this," I said. "You picked me up because you felt sorry for me—because I didn't have any job or money or any place to sleep. Cot, I don't want to wear out my welcome. How can you afford to keep a lot of people around here, crowding you up, eating the way I eat?"

Cotton grinned as I lifted an armload of wood. "Don't you worry about that. We're pretty well fixed these days. We've got plenty." He repeated the word lovingly, saying again, "Plenty."

As I turned away with my load he asked sharply, "Can you keep a secret?"

Heat came up in my throat and blocked my breathing. "Well," I replied, "what do you think?"

"We found something in the willows."

I didn't wish him to begin any revelation which he would feel obliged to terminate abruptly. I took a deep breath. "Let's get this stove-wood in the kitchen first. Then we'll come outside where we can talk."

Annie had a bread-board on the table; she was preparing dough for pies. As she leaned in concentration, her dress came up a little and exposed her shiny shoe-heels. . . . Violet stood watching with satisfaction, a coffee cup in his hands. He winked at us, and drank the last of his coffee; he moved up behind Annie and bent as she was bending, his arms spread wide outside of hers.

"Pies," said Violet, "ought to be made like this—"

Annie ducked under his arms. She cried, "You're the freshest thing around here!" and started after him, making claws of her floury hands. Violet lit out of the door and the rest of us shouted.

"If I did that," said Cotton, "I reckon you wouldn't chase me."

"You just try."

"How about me?" I asked.

Annie tossed her head, looking at Cotton and Muddy, speaking of me but not to me. "Oh, no," she cried, with gaiety so extreme that it sounded false. "Rich was around here all morning, and he didn't even offer to hold my little finger. I guess he's afraid of me."

Which was doubtless the truth, but I opened my mouth to protest just the same. Cotton didn't give me a chance. He told Annie that he would hold more than her little finger, right then and there, and they began to struggle.

Annie screamed for help. "Muddy, they're regular wild Indians!"

"Can't do a thing about it," said Mrs. Goss, with her head in the oven. "They're men, and you're pretty. You know what men are like. Before George Goss wedded me, I had me lots of sweethearts."

Cotton managed to kiss Annie, but it wasn't much of a kiss, and he had flour all over his coat. Annie's face was colored from struggle or embarrassment—more probably the former, I thought.

"I hate men," she cried.

"How about me?" I asked again. I was always at the tail end of the procession where women were concerned.

"No, not you, Rich. You wouldn't steal a kiss from a girl, would you? I'm sure you wouldn't steal anything."

"Wouldn't I?" I howled, and by this time Vi had come back to join in the laughter.

Cotton grinned at me, and shrugged. "Now that the shooting's over, Rich, how about a little real target practice? You often practice firing with your gun?"

"Not as often as I should."

"Cot and me," announced Violet, "we try to keep in trim. We burn a little powder every week."

Muddy said, "Every day."

"Well, Sundays are usually our best time. Don't know what there is about a peaceful Sunday that makes me want to shoot, but I always do like to shoot on Sunday. Get your gun."

I brought my revolver and belt. They were under the sofa where I had put them the night before; I had left them there deliberately—an obvious affirmation of my trust in the Gosses—when I moved to the barn during the night.

"I haven't got many shells," I said. "Just the ones in this belt."

"What is your gun?"

"A .45. A Bisley model Colt."

"We haven't got any cartridges like that. You better go slow until we can visit town and buy you some shells."

Muddy warned us not to stray too far and forget about dinner, but the boys said there was no danger of that; they would go to the dump.

This dump was in a ravine of slight proportions, beyond out-buildings north of the house. There the family disposed of tin cans and kitchen refuse and other junk. It didn't seem like a very pleasant place for target practice—flies buzzed around, even after the coolness of a September night—but Violet gathered several tin cans, large and small, and we carried them to the edge of the corn-field beyond the dump. Especially I was eager to see how Cotton managed that big revolver in its little holster.

Vi and I started shooting first. He wanted to shoot for tobacco, but since I didn't use it we agreed to shoot for a quarter. We took two identical tomato

cans and put them on the ground, side by side in a deep wheel track; and Violet filled the cans with earth so they wouldn't roll.

We each picked a can and fired five shots, aimed fire, at perhaps seventy feet. Violet only hit his can twice, but both holes were in the red tomato that marked the center of the label. His other three bullets whisked the earth alongside.

I hit my can five times; they were all bunched at the bottom; I couldn't seem to get up into the tomato.

Violet said that I had won, and gave me a quarter. "Now go ahead, Brother Cotton."

Cotton said, "Get a big can. I'm not no Annie Oakley."

Vi set up the large can: a two-gallon size—the kind of yellow tin in which packages of burley tobacco used to be kept at the stores.

Cotton backed off about thirty feet.

"He's too close," I whispered.

"I don't aim to ever shoot a man farther away than this," Cotton retorted over his shoulder.

He dropped his left hand suddenly; the midget holster turned forward, and Cotton's .44 began to pound. He fired double-action, of course, and as rapidly as he could pull the trigger. He put four shots through the big tobacco can; one bullet barely creased the heavy crimped rim.

Well, I had read and heard my share of tales about fancy-shooting gunmen; I knew all the common legends about people poking spots out of cards at a hundred paces. Such stories were nonsense; but this was the very finest hip shooting I had ever seen.

There was a suggestion of paleness in Vi's face as he and I examined the target.

"Cot," said Vi, "if this can is Brew Tatum, he's deader than hell."

His brother came forward, loading his gun and examining the little fresh smolders of burnt leather in his gun pouch. "Well, Rich," he said, "that's it!"

I said, "It's damn good shooting. Just what do you mean—'that's it'?"

"Brew Tatum. Brewster is his first name, but they call him Brew. It's Charley Tatum's brother."

"I've got his hat," said Violet.

I said, "So that's what was giving you such a bosom a while ago. Where did you pick it up?"

"The willows." Violet pointed. "Where all that smoking was, last night. That hat was just laying there this morning."

"Go get it, why don't you?" asked Cotton. "I reckon Rich is a friend worth having, especially since he can shoot the way he can, and since he's got the Tatums after him already."

"Have I got the Tatums after me?"

"You'll see," said Cotton. "Fetch the hat, Vi."

//

VIOLET WENT TO THE HOUSE AND GOT THE HAT. Both boys were positive that it belonged to the elder Tatum. They said that they had seen him wearing it several times in the month just past. It bore the imprint of a Kansas City hatter, and the stamped gilt initials—*B. T.*—were more or less obscured by reason of wear and sweat. It was a good black hat with the crown peaked instead of pushed flat, the way so many people wore hats out there.

“Yes,” said Cotton, “we rode early and had a look around. First thing Violet spies is that hat in the weeds. It..wasn’t shot off; there weren’t any holes in it.”

Vi explained, “Reckon it got brushed off his head by the branches when those horses were jumping around; and he couldn’t find it in the dark, nor didn’t wait to.”

Cotton went on: “We followed their trail across the road and south a couple miles—they were galloping mostly. Then they circled, and took the road straight into Pahoka. We came back and rode across Evening, and took their back track to the north. We lost the track a few times but always found it again,

or what we thought was it. It went to his land. Brew Tatum has got land just to the north of ours."

Violet said dreamily, "Section Twenty-four, Township Twenty-one."

"Yes," Cotton said. "God damn Section Twenty-four, Township Twenty-one."

He spoke with such even-tempered ferocity that I was baffled. "Why?"

"Go ahead, Cot," said Violet, "whyn't you tell him?"

Cotton Goss squatted on his heels. He trailed long fingers across the dried clay. "That's where we lost our Pappy—up on Section Twenty-four. Has Muddy told you anything about that?"

"Just that he was shot: that's all I know."

"He was shot right after we made the Run. I showed you our well-digging apparatus. Well, there were a lot of claims—disputed ones—on some of the land around here, and folks had a lot of trouble about settling some of them. Violet wasn't of age—he was only sixteen."

"Seventeen," corrected Vi.

"He was seventeen, so he couldn't file on the land. I was turned twenty-one, so Pappy and I filed on all the land we could afford to buy—all we could scrape up the money for—and, believe me, it took a lot of scraping. Out in the western division of the Strip, or in the middle, we could have got the land for less; but we were east of Ninety-seven Degrees and Thirty Minutes. We had to pay two dollars and a half an acre; so you can see we didn't have a dime left."

His fingers went round and round, making concentric circles in the dust.

"We needed money the worst way—didn't have enough to eat, hardly—and when Pappy got a chance to dig a well up on Section Twenty-four, he jumped at it. They were fussing over that land. Brew Tatum owned the country on the north and he claimed that section, too. But a man name of Wingate said it was his property, and he would pay Pappy and us boys to bring in water for him. The three of us went up there and started drilling. We got to work, six or seven in the morning; and soon we needed to fetch our other machine: we had broke a cog-wheel. Pappy said he would stay by the well; and Vi and I took the team down here to bring up the other drill."

Violet said, "It was well past noon before we got back."

"Yes," Cotton related, "it was early afternoon. Pappy had been laying there in the sun for hours, but he wasn't dead yet. He could still talk. He said that two of Tatum's men rode up and started to bully-rag him. Pap wasn't much on talk or explaining either. Maybe those men thought he was Wingate, who claimed the property that Brew Tatum wanted. They called him a name and he went for his gun. He was kind of lamed-up, due to war experience, and they shot the hell out of him. There were actually seven holes in him, but he didn't die until a few minutes before we reached home."

Violet indicated the high ground across Evening Creek. "Buried him right over there."

"Vi and I rode to the Tatum place," Cotton said. "It was just a couple tents with wooden floors and a chuck-wagon alongside, in those days. Brew Tatum wasn't there; and the two men that Pappy had

described—they had gone to Pahoka City. We got in town about dark. It was Saturday night and the place was just blazing. We came on those two in the barber shop. One was in a chair, with lather on his face, and the other man setting there talking. I tried to pull my gun, but it stuck or something. The fellow who wasn't yet being shaved—he shot me through the right shoulder; but Vi had his gun out, and he killed that fellow, and killed the other one when he got up all foamy but still trying to reach his pistol."

Violet said, "That's the reason Cotton shoots the way he does. He swore he'd never draw gun from holster again, when there was trouble—he wouldn't run such risk another time. Why, he was practicing left-handed with a holster rigged up the way he's got it now, before that doctor ever pulled the stitches out of his wound."

I wanted to know, "Did you go after Brew Tatum, too?"

"Nobody made a move to arrest us right then. A man in the barber shop said that Brew was eating supper in the hotel. There he was, too, gobbling up stew alongside his wife and daughter. We didn't want to shoot him there, and we told him to come outside and fetch his gun along. Well, he just sat at that table, and cried, and he pounded his hands on the cloth. He said that he didn't have anything to do with Pappy being shot, and for God's sake not to kill him in cold blood. He said that those men acted without his orders or his knowledge, and it served them right to be killed. So we went back outside and then they arrested us."

"But you weren't sentenced?"

Cotton explained: "They could never get a jury

to agree about Violet. Finally it was dismissed or squashed or whatever you call it. They never did arrest me, except that first night for a while."

The three of us crouched in the bright sun. Violet had an empty cartridge and kept filling it up with fine dust and pouring the dust out again.

"Seems to me, Cot," I said, "that you spoke to the station agent about your having killed one man."

Cotton stood up and wiped his hands on his pants. "Oh, sure, but that wasn't anything. That was just a kind of guard or waiter at Cookson's Bar."

"What they call a bouncer," added Violet.

"Sure. He was a bad one and I never have regretted killing him. It happened a couple years ago. There's an old goat, name of Barrow, who takes photographs around——"

"I know him," I said. "He talked to me yesterday."

The Goss boys looked at me for a moment. "Well, then," said Violet, "you know what an old soak he is. He drank liquor in at Cookson's, and couldn't pay for it, and that big fellow started to beat him up. It was cruel and awful. And Cotton he stepped up and objected. They had words, and finally the bouncer made the mistake of trying to draw his pistol. Cotton there, he tips up his holster just like you saw him do, and that bouncer is dead before he hits the floor."

"Only," said Cotton, "he didn't bounce when he hit it."

"Reckon he's bouncing in the Bad Place nowadays," decided Violet happily.

We went up to the house and cleaned our guns, the boys joshing with Annie. I had plenty of notions to occupy me. . . . They hadn't explained why Brew

Tatum and some other unidentified man were riding over their land; but it was easy to understand why Brew might have fired at Violet the night before. This was the nearest thing to a feud that I had ever run across.

The Gosses didn't like the Tatums, and the Tatums hated the Gosses, and the shadow of dead George Goss was always on the ground wherever the two families walked. I had interfered, through deliberate choice, in a Goss-Tatum row. Without doubt Cotton was correct when he hinted that the Tatums would be looking for me too, the first chance they got. From now on, so long as I stayed on Evening Creek or in Pahoka City, I was in this thing too. It looked as if I had become a Goss, for better or for worse.

I didn't like to think about those clipped-out pieces of cloth, whatever they were, in my shirt pocket. I wished that there wasn't any cloth; I wished I hadn't opened the drawer.

TWO OR THREE HOURS AFTER DINNER, ANNIE wanted to go riding. She said that she had scarcely ever been on a horse and thought it would be fun to ride.

They had a lot of gay talk about how it should be managed. Naturally there wasn't any side-saddle in the barn, and Annie's flimsy wardrobe didn't equip her for riding astride. Muddy said a pair of overalls might do, if the legs were basted up; she took Annie into her bedroom and closed the door, and there was a great deal of giggling.

The girl came out, looking self-conscious, but prancing to show off just the same. I could never understand then why women made such a fuss about appearing in men's clothes, and can't yet. If they acted humble and pathetic (as if they knew that their feminine proportions were distorted and made ludicrous) it might give rise to sympathy and understanding in the men. But usually women seem to think that they are the quintessence of sex when they put on such rig, and they are anything but that. So I was mildly disgusted with Annie for all her carrying-on.

But that wasn't the reason why I refused to go on the ride. My false position in this life at the Gosses'—the pose and character which necessarily I had assumed—preyed upon me. I felt, in some curious fashion, that I was actually a penniless wanderer who had been taken in by these people and given food and shelter.

If this were not true in fact, it was true in practice and in theory. Also I recognized early that other truth, of which the boys themselves were becoming gradually aware: we were bound to be rivals for Annie's affections.

Let Cotton and Vi take her riding, I thought jealously. I would be just so much extra baggage if I went along.

I sat sullenly on the porch with Muddy and the dog, watching Annie dance out to the stable, watching the men saddle up.

"Rich, you better come," Cotton yelled at me. "We only got three saddles but——"

"I just as soon ride bareback," said Vi.

I told them I was too lazy, so they rode away. They had put Annie on a mare called Sissy; Muddy informed me that Sissy was the gentlest of the lot. Violet rode bareback on his Tony colt, and Cotton took the horse he had ridden that morning—the whitest buckskin of all, named Chief. Quannah was left in the corral to whicker sadly after the others.

"You better think twice," said Muddy.

"I've thought," I told her.

So I had—about a lot of things, including those tell-tale pieces of clipped sheeting or pillow-case material

in my pocket. Naturally I could reveal none of my doubts on this score to Mrs. Goss, but I determined to test her on another subject before I left the porch.

She wasn't sewing at first—just rocking comfortably, taking her ease, warning the collie to keep that busy tail out from under the rocker.

Muddy chatted, telling me trivial things about her boys and about the community, though never mentioning fight or feud. We talked about money a little, and agreed that it was terrible to be without it. At that point I wanted to introduce the subject of train robberies, especially the most recent one on the S. C. & W., but something told me not to.

I had formed a wholesome respect for Muddy's shrewdness; just why, I don't exactly know. She really didn't seem to be very clever, most times. Perhaps it was the illusion of her eyes . . . always so sprightly and sidelong, so reluctant to be fastened on anything.

She slapped nervous hands, finally, and said she couldn't bear to remain idle forever—that she always had to be doing something. "Rich, fetch me my sewing box, if you want to help an old lady."

"Where is it?"

"It's kind of heavy or I'd get it myself. I mean that bottom draw—the one you got the needle out of. That's what I call my sewing box. Just pull it out of the bureau, and fetch the whole thing, draw and all."

I went to get the drawer. When I pulled it out of the chest I reached down quickly for the other scraps of cloth; they were still exposed because of the disorder I had made when looking for a needle. I jammed those little pieces into my pocket in one mo-

tion. I had picked up two before; now I had five altogether. If there were a sixth scrap in existence it must be underneath somewhere.

I carried the drawer out to the porch, and Muddy had me drag over the wash bench to place it on. She hunted for scissors—which she called shears, no matter how small they were—and for a needle and thread. She set to work, mending a torn cuff on a shirt.

“You did this,” she scolded the collie. “Yes, you did. You were playing with Cotton and you tore his shirt with your teeth. . . . Rich, how about singing me a song?”

I sat with elbows on my knees, watching her sew. “I can’t sing for shucks. Why do you want me to sing, anyway?”

“Oh, it would be nice out here. . . . I listen to the wind and I guess it reminds me of music. Don’t you kind of figure it’s like that—that the prairie wind is like a fiddle, sometimes? Listen now, and see if it ain’t.”

I turned my head, trying to please Muddy. I could follow the wind with my eyes as well as my ears. A light breeze, irregular and spreading wide, touching the grass on higher ground across the creek where the boys said that George Goss was buried . . . lacing among willows . . . certain leaves were still green and summery; and the wind caught those narrow green leaves and turned them up and out until their pale backs were exposed.

It came on, thin breeze folding over, until it passed our ears and sighed into the east.

“A phonograph!” Mrs. Goss cried.

“A what?”

"A gramophone-thing—you know, with a crank and horn, and all kinds of cylinders to play on it. That's what I want, and that's what I'll have the boys purchase for me!"

Her face was alight; her hands tried to clap, though the clapping was muffled by the shirt they held. "A phonograph. Sure enough! I never thought of that before."

I put my back to the sun, leaning against the porch post and looking down at the fat little woman. "Look here," I said gruffly, "I can't figure it."

"Can't figure what?"

"This money business, Muddy. It's got me worried. I talked to Cotton this morning but I'm not any way reassured. I don't see how you can do it."

Her pale gaze strayed over the landscape and flitted past me on its return. "Do what? Buy a phonograph?"

"They cost up to a hundred and fifty dollars," I said, "and that doesn't include many cylinders. I guess there's maybe thirty or forty that can be bought—different tunes—but that would cost a lot too."

And when she didn't answer, but only chuckled in her throat, I talked on desperately: "It's the whole business . . . you've got two extra mouths to feed. I thought it was just for the night, but Cotton tells me to stay. And naturally you'll want to keep Annie."

Muddy said, "Be glad to keep her till Doomsday. And you too, Mister Rich. I reckon I know: the boys didn't spare too many details, but I conclude that you saved the life of my son Violet. We want you to stay here forever."

I made up a laugh, and said, "Forever is a long time.

I don't see how you can think of it. The boys aren't doing any well-digging nowadays; they told me so. There seems to be only crop enough here this year to bed and feed your stock, and maybe not enough for that. You're not rich people and. . . ." I let my voice trail off; I didn't dare say any more.

Muddy sat rocking; she was stitching again. Sometimes she would grub around in the drawer for something she needed, and I watched her closely. If she missed those scraps of white cloth, she gave no sign.

At last I could imagine how the scraps of linen came to be there in the first place. They weren't saved; they had just fallen into the drawer. Muddy said that she used that drawer for her sewing box, and if she or Cotton or Vi had cut out those pieces of cloth they might easily have done so while holding something—say, a pillow-case—over the open drawer. A pillow-case. I saw that every time now. I couldn't get it out of my mind. Two or three pillow-cases. . . .

I still couldn't see just where the Cherokee Indian came into the picture.

Muddy sewed placidly. "Rich, it's most thoughtful of you to fret about us. It does my heart good." She used the same expression her son had used that day. She said, "We got plenty. I wonder if the boys ever suggested to you—when you've been talking together—that there might be money on our land."

"They did say something about a gold mine, but they talked as if it was a foolish notion."

"Maybe not so foolish," Muddy told me. She hung the mended shirt on the back of her chair and then set her gaze firmly upon me.

She cried, "I reckon I've got to the bottom of this

now! You were reluctant to go a-riding with Annie and the boys because you felt like a pauper. Well, don't you dare think of yourself that way again. Maybe you'll find money some place or other—who knows? Money comes sudden and surprising on occasion." She sighed. . . .

"Take my man George. I told you that he rode with Mosby during the War. Well, he was just as poor as poor could be; and then one day he and the other Rangers went out with Mosby, and they wrecked them a Yankee train, not far from Winchester, Virginia. There was one hundred and eighty thousand dollars currency on that train, and each of those boys got them a piece of that, share-and-share. George said he got about two thousand dollars; and he had been as poor as Job's turkey before. . . . You can't tell, maybe a train might get halted around here some place. Who knows?"

I shook my head and walked off the porch. My heels were cold as ice; I couldn't feel the earth under my boots. . . . I took a turn around the yard, almost as far as the well-digging machine, and then came back with hands in my pockets.

"Of course," I said, "I wouldn't want any people to be hurt."

"Pshaw, nobody would get hurt." She laughed. "Maybe the moon will bust wide open some night, and shed silver nickels all over you!"

"Maybe tonight?" I asked with dry throat.

"No, I reckon not tonight. Maybe some other night. You stick close to us, Rich Williams. Us Gosses will use you better than the world may have done heretofore."

She stretched her barrel-shaped body, and yawned, and said that she wished she had that phonograph. "I'd play it and play it! Marches: I like those best. I'd get me lots and lots of cylinders of band music. . . . See that horse, Rich?" and she pointed to Quanah, scratching his neck on the top rail of the fence.

"That's Quanah. Yes, I see him."

"Now, do you get Violet's saddle out of the barn and put it on Quanah! You ride off and find those three, wherever they've gone. I don't want you setting all gloomy and wherried, young as you are. You ought to be out with those boys and that pretty Annie, a-having fun."

I told her, "Three's a company. I mean—maybe four is a crowd, in this case."

Muddy got out another shirt that needed attention. She didn't look at me any more. "Rich, those are my own boys, and already I love that girl. I'm mighty fond of you too. I reckon God alone knows what the future holds in store. Maybe she'll be yours—maybe Vi's or Cotton's girl. Or maybe even—all three of yours: such things have happened in this world. . . . You go a-riding. I don't want to see this sadness in your face no longer. Me and Belle Starr, we'll keep good company together whilst you're gone."

The collie wagged when she heard her name.

"Belle Starr? I thought her name was just Belle."

"No, Belle Starr. See the star on her head?"

"Muddy, did you know Belle Starr, ever?"

Muddy said, "Knew Belle Starr well. My man and me, we were at her funeral when they buried her, and when Jim July took Doc Watson away. But Watson never killed Belle Starr, no matter what you hear."

Reckon I know who shot her in the back; and I'm not telling."

I had learned more than I had expected to learn, more than I wanted to know. I went out and saddled Quanah. He carried me west into the grass and rising wind beyond.

This was going to be tough . . . the sweat stood on my forehead. It wasn't a case of merely liking these Gosses. They were really my kind of people, and I loved them.

ON THE WEST BANK OF EVENING CREEK A LIP of prairie rose. Once over this crest, I was out of sight of the Goss buildings, huddled as they were in a flat valley.

Perhaps I had ridden thirty rods beyond the weedy summit when Quanah jerked his head and whinnied. I looked to right and left, and couldn't see anything.

I stopped the horse and made him stand, and listened as hard as I could.

At first there was nothing but the plaintive song of wind and the crying of hawks which rode in the blue air high above. Then my ears picked up a crunching of gravel somewhere in the south, and again the horse twisted his ears and called.

"The others," I thought. Instinctively I headed to the south.

That fold of ground pressed up in two waves—from west and south. Along the southern boundary of the ridge, a narrow tributary of Evening Creek drained down from empty prairies that seemed to extend to Colorado and Texas.

It was better, I felt, to join the boys and Annie now rather than to ride alone in my apprehensive suspicion.

Quanah trotted across slanting pasture-land where few beasts, it seemed, were ever pastured; he stepped over the little stream. I surveyed the gorge, expecting to see three buckskin horses and their riders.

Instead I discovered an old mule with a blanket strapped on its back. The animal was standing, head down, in front of a ten-foot cliff eroded by rivulets. The mule was sorrel in color—hard to see against all that yellow and brown.

Some distance past the mule, a man was prowling down the course of the stream—furtive, sneaking in every movement and gesture. He was carrying something; I couldn't see just what. He kept his head bent as if in that way he might more surely escape detection.

There were too many peculiar things happening around that farm, so I looked at my revolver before I did anything else. The man had not heard me. He crept on, stalking the hard-packed sand as if he wanted to cross the branch but was fearful of getting his feet wet.

A breeze washed the length of this prairie canyon with freshness and strength. I felt wind pushing hard against my back, and Quanah's mane blew out. The gust flew down the stream, rippling the water and catching the prowler's coat—smothering him for a moment, flapping the black cloth wide.

I stood in my stirrups for a better view, and Quanah nickered again.

The stranger turned; he stiffened abruptly; he dumped something on the ground, and stumbled into a run. . . . As I galloped closer I could observe his ludicrous scramblings: he came near falling several times. His shoes kicked the shallows as he went

skipping stiff-legged toward his mule. Then, seeming to decide that the slow-footed beast offered little hope for rapid escape, the fugitive flung himself away and tried to climb the bank, working on all fours, tearing gravel as he clawed.

Quannah plowed the water, stamping it high and wetting my trouser-legs. I pulled out my gun, and yelled at the climber to stop.

He went scrambling on. I fired once, in the air; and promptly the man threw his arms out and slid to the bottom. He landed in a pile, as collapsed as if my bullet had drilled him instead of poking a harmless hole in the sky.

My first feeling was of shame. I felt like the biggest fool in the Territory.

"Mr. Barrow," I cried, "I didn't know that was you!" I jumped from my horse to help the old man up.

He was frightened half to death.

"Mr. Barrow," I said again, "I didn't know that was you, or I wouldn't have shot! I just shot in the air——"

His scrawny cheeks blew in and out. There was the dust of clay in the old man's beard and, as before, a sweetish wave of whisky-smell hung around him. It must have hung around him every hour, waking or sleeping.

"You did give me a turn," he stammered, "but I had it coming! I shouldn't have come poaching as I did. It would serve me right if the Goss boys blasted my carcass."

"Poaching?" I echoed. "You mean—after fish or birds or something?"

The old photographer took out an abominable handkerchief and wiped his face. He muttered: "They say confession is good for the soul . . . well, I was searching for some of that gold."

I began to laugh, but stopped short when I saw that poor Mr. Barrow was in tears.

"Go ahead," he wailed. "Laugh at me!"

I told him, "I don't believe there is any gold hereabouts."

He blinked through dirty spectacles. "Didn't Cotton and Vi admit they found gold?"

"You've known them longer than I have. They're pretty close-mouthed. . . ."

He said, "I was surprised when I heard that you was out here at the Goss place. They don't often become friendly with strangers."

"We got acquainted at Cookson's."

"Yes, sonny. The story was talked around."

"Funny thing," I said, hoping to brighten the old man up a little. "Why do they call it Cookson's Bar? It belongs to the Tatums."

"Cookson used to own it. Charley Tatum bought him out." The old man tried to get the crushed clay off his knees. It was dented into the cloth; it wouldn't come out easily. He looked up at last, his eyes hopeless in their ugly sockets. "I got a favor to ask, sonny—What did you say your name was?"

I told him.

"Oh yes, I recall now. Mr. Williams, I got a favor to ask of you. Don't tell the Goss boys that you come across me here."

"What difference would it make?"

"It might make a lot of difference to them. To you

and me maybe, also." He bent closer. His breath was offending me, and yet I could not turn away. I was spellbound by his forlorn and hideous face.

He whispered hoarsely, "Mr. Williams, I'll split with you fifty-fifty . . . you understand? You're a honest man, because you impressed me that way when first I met you; but I have reason to think that you're now associating with wicked people. I mean—wicked people——"

I heard myself swearing, "They've been good people, to me."

"Robbers! Robbers—do you understand? I have reason to think they are! There's a reward, folks say: five hundred dollars. Maybe more than that. . . ."

It was peculiar that I should feel guilty, more guilty than the Goss boys might have felt. It was as if already I fought to conceal some specific and damning information which I did not in fact possess.

Old Mr. Barrow failed to accept or recognize my guilt. He forced up his trembling hands (hands that shuddered and squeezed, blue-nailed fingers that clung like burrs on my lapels).

"I've got evidence," he gasped. "I'm almost certain I got evidence that would stand in court. Those fellows robbed the S. C. & W.! Maybe I didn't tell you, but they had to blow a lock-box in order to get at the money, and they blew up some of the money too. Folks found it, all burnt and frayed. . . . They found it in the grass. Well, last night . . ."

He began to cough, strangled with the excitement that possessed him. When I struck him between the shoulders he only huddled away, throwing out an arm as if begging me to desist. He wrenched a flat bottle

out of his coat pocket; the bottle was almost empty, and the old photographer, still coughing, gulped down the meager contents. He wiped his mouth against his own coat shoulder and tossed the bottle from him. I saw the current rolling it away through the shallows.

"There was a bill," whispered Mr. Barrow.

"What kind of a bill?"

"A money bill! Greenback—five dollars. Violet Goss gave it to Ole Flugstad at the Racket Store when he purchased something or other; and Ole bought some medicine from me last night, because he was out of stock. A dollar bottle: Mozley's Lemon Elixir . . . cures chills, sleeplessness and indigestion. I told you I sold medicines?"

I prompted: "Ole gave you a five-dollar bill——"

"Yes, yes," Lucian Barrow cried. "It was one of the greenbacks robbed off the train. It was frayed on one end and had marks on it: most people might not recognize them, but I did. I know what they were: powder burns, dynamite burns! That greenback had been in an explosion. I didn't notice it till after I had give Ole his change and he was gone to eat supper. Then I followed him and asked. He said Violet had give him the bill."

I swung round in the wind. . . . It was hard to marshal my wits. More than anything else, I was oppressed with pity and disgust and loathing for this scarecrow, and resentment against his impulse to turn on men who had befriended him.

In the same moment I realized that soon I must hate myself for the same reason.

Back along the course of the stream I walked, and picked up the camera which Barrow had abandoned

in his flight. He clutched the big instrument and began to rub off dust with his dirty handkerchief.

He babbled about evidence. He had kept the green-back; he said that he didn't even use it to buy another bottle of whisky, though he was sorely tempted to do so.

"Why were you lugging your camera today?" I wanted to know.

"To get evidence—more evidence! Then I would send it to the railroad company. I got pictures of the Gosses already. They sat for me two weeks ago, the boys and their mother; they said they'd never had a portrait took together before. I'll get a picture of their house, so all the marshals and officers can recognize it. Then I won't have to come and show them the way when they capture them. I don't want to get shot," he babbled. "No, I got an awful fear of being shot! I was almost shot three times in the War. A shell plowed up the ground close beside me——"

AT LAST I GOT THE OLD MAN ON HIS MULE (HE said that he had borrowed it from a Mexican he knew, who worked on the railroad section) and headed him toward Pahoka City.

His mumblings, his nervous insistence and appeals, were becoming less rational. I hoped that he didn't have another bottle in his pocket; he might fall from the mule and break his neck before he reached town.

I rode up out of the gully. . . . After all, maybe it would be a good thing if Mr. Barrow did break his neck. . . .

With desperation I tried to make sense out of the facts in this case. Unexpectedly, without machination or intention on my part, I found myself intimately associated with men who might prove to be two of the three criminals I had been ordered to run down. The points against them might be explained away separately, but the cumulative effect was ugly.

Violet and Cotton did little farm work, yet they had money to spend. They had spent a lot before this, if local opinion about a gold mine was to be taken at anything like face value. The scraps of cloth from Muddy's drawer seemed to have been cut from pil-

low-cases—and pillow-cases, with eye-holes chopped out, were part of the paraphernalia used by the bandits.

Vaguely enough, Muddy had talked about the prosperity which might befall if I stayed with the family. She mentioned her husband's train-robbing experience: that might have easily become an ambition rather than a mere domestic anecdote.

Now on top of everything else, appeared Mr. Barrow with his tale of a powder-burned, explosion-frayed greenback—without doubt the same bill which I had seen Violet give to Ole in the Racket Store. True, Vi might have acquired the bill in the course of trade; or it might have been one of the bank notes counted from Charley Tatum's stack at Cookson's Bar. I didn't think it was.

Old Barrow had hoped in his maundering mind to play a lone hand, and rake in the reward himself, until I interrupted his game and he felt compelled to deal me in. His absurd project was laughable and weird—a cartoon of amateur detective pursuit—but a logical result of the delirium in which the old man was said to move much of the time.

I hoped that his mouth was closed for a few days at least. I had promised faithfully to appear in town to examine the greenback, and I warned Mr. Barrow to say nothing to anyone about his suspicions, on pain of my informing the Gosses and giving them a chance to leave the country.

The dusty wind cried around me as I reached the prairie. It cried that my connivance with Lucian Barrow was as duplicit as the fondness and gratitude which so readily I displayed to the family who had

sheltered me. My spirit gave its answer: this was not true; already I had acquired an admiration for these people, and no future circumstance would alter my feeling for them.

Trotting through breeze-torn grass, the Goss boys and Annie Lingen approached. I could hear their rollicking outcry while they were still some distance away. They came side by side, like trick riders parading at a rodeo; the horses moved in a rank with flanks and withers close.

Annie stretched out her arms, holding Violet's hand with her own right hand, and Cotton's with her left.

"Look at me," she cried. "I can ride without holding on!"

I said, "Looks to me as if you're holding on."

The boys declared that they had heard a shot. They had circled the slopes; they thought the shot came from the direction of Evening Creek.

"Oh, I shot at a snake."

"Get him?"

"He crawled in his hole."

"Then you must not have been shooting as well as you did this forenoon," Violet said. "I'll take you on and get my two-bits back."

"Any time," I told him.

The men's faces were flushed with the exertion of riding. They looked like two skinny Pawnee bucks who had been hunting buffalo; but it seemed that they were pursuing game more priceless than buffalo. They were pursuing love, and I had hoped to follow that same chase in my own grim and fumbling manner.

Annie watched me with eyes bright and hard, with full lips smiling. "Rich, you wouldn't come riding before, and now I want to ride with you," and she took back her hand which Violet had been openly fondling.

"I want you to take me for a ride, Rich," she declared again. "Just a teentsie one."

"Like to get saddled-galled," Cotton told her. "You're not used to this riding."

Annie smiled at me. "Over to that next hollow, and then down to the barn?"

"Come on." I swung Quanah toward the north. Annie broke away and tried to gallop alongside me; she joggled and squealed, gripping the horn with one hand. Cotton and Vi laughed at this, shouting instructions at Annie until we rode out of earshot.

I saw the brothers moving homeward. They went into a ravine and their heads vanished below the grassy crest. All I could feel was a great wave of thankfulness that they had not come upon Mr. Barrow and me while we talked. . . . Barrow was far beyond their sight by now; the main road stretched behind a southern ridge.

Annie Lingen crowded up her mare and grasped my rein. I looked around in surprise and then brought Quanah to a halt.

". . . Talk to you a minute, Rich."

She was staring me full in the face. Her eyes seemed polished, shining as always, but now there was no laughter shaping her lips. Her cherry-brown hair had become disarranged by the wind; and the girl jerked impatiently at the few remaining pins . . . her mane whipped out with abandon.

She brushed stray locks from her cheeks. "Or maybe," she said, "you'd just as soon not speak with me!"

"I'd always be willing to talk to you." But she wouldn't smile back at me.

"What sort of a man are you, Rich Williams?"

"I'm the sort of man who'd like to follow you around. No mistake about that."

Her face reddened. "Don't give me that talk! I did like you. I liked you a whole lot, at first. But how can you steal from folks who've been kind to you?"

She was wholly serious: she believed what she was saying. . . .

"Annie, I've never stolen a nickel from anyone! What on earth do you mean?"

"A nickel? I don't know what you stole. Maybe it wasn't a nickel or a dollar or not even a hundred dollars. But you stole something. I saw you."

My mind went racing back: there was the confusion of recollection, the thought of secrets I knew, the sense of my suspicions, the memory of what Muddy had said——

"I don't know what you took, Rich, but you took something! I saw you this morning—you had that drawer open—when Muddy wanted you to get a needle and string. Just when I went to the door, I looked over and saw you pick up something and stick it in your pocket. You can't deny that. I saw you——"

Her voice rose in its slender outrage. "I saw you—take something—out of that—drawer!"

Little bent circles of cloth . . . they were searing my shirt. "Oh, that," I said. And again, "That."

I WAS DIGGING AROUND FOR SOMETHING TO TELL her. I dared not tell her what I had found; yet no common explanation would suffice. . . . I cleared my throat.

"Well?" said Annie, never shifting her glare.

"I didn't know that you saw me."

"Course you didn't, or you wouldn't have taken it."

"Taken what?"

"Don't be a fool. Taken whatever it was."

Now I had decided what I must tell her. . . . "Do you really want to know what I took out of that drawer?"

"Of course I do."

"There's just one thing. Have you mentioned it to the boys?"

She shook her head. "No. I wanted to talk to you first, alone. That was why I wanted you to go riding this afternoon. I thought the boys might go on ahead and leave us for a while or something. I haven't said a word to them."

I pushed Quanah closer beside her pony and grasped Annie's hand. She jerked it away from me.

"I can trust you, Annie, can't I? If you'll promise

to say nothing to the boys, I'll show you what I took from that drawer, and tell you why I took it."

"What if it's something I ought to tell them?"

"It isn't; I give you my word."

There were tumbleweeds rolling in the wind, and the late sun made golden fuzz out of them as they drifted around us. I could feel Annie's gaze all over my face. "You don't look like a thief," she whispered. "Was it very valuable, the thing you stole?"

"Not worth two cents in currency."

The girl took a deep breath. "All right. Show me. I swear I won't say anything to Cotton or Vi, or even to Muddy."

I dug down in my pocket and showed her the little pieces of linen.

Annie puzzled over them and then pushed the scraps back in my palm. "I can't understand why you'd keep things like that—little pieces of old rags—or swipe them out of somebody else's bureau——"

I said, "I'm afraid the Goss boys are in trouble. It happens that these little pieces of cloth might be used as evidence against them."

Her face turned pale. "Trouble," and she mumbled the word. "Oh, I can't believe that Cotton and Vi——"

"Recollect that shooting last night?"

"Yes. But they said it——"

"Never mind what they said it was. Suppose these rags of cloth could be used against them—a kind of evidence—some queer evidence that I can't explain to you because I'm not sure enough myself. Suppose some enemy of the boys came to that house while we were gone, and searched, and found those little pieces.

They'd be in for more trouble, wouldn't they? The boys, I mean."

Her shoulders quivered; the wind was growing colder. "Maybe you're right. If what you say is true . . . oh, why do Cotton and Vi have to be in trouble—there's so much trouble in the world already——"

"Annie, I took those scraps of cloth to keep them safe. The boys and Muddy mustn't know that I know."

Annie turned her face away. "Promise you won't show those things to anyone. I mean that—not to anyone!"

"As long as I'm here on this place," I said, weighing my words, "I promise that no one else shall see them."

She sobbed, "I'm sorry, Rich, that I suspected— Oh, I'm sorry," and she reached out to bend her fingers around my hand and squeeze it sharply. "Rich. . . ."

"What?"

"We're out here alone. Nobody can see us. You can kiss me if you want to."

Something seemed to get in the way . . . even now I can't explain just why a man will say contrary things in such a moment. But speak the words I did: "Maybe you would rather have Cotton."

The girl drew back. "What made you say that?"

I mumbled, "Last night you said *Old Dog Tray* reminded you of your father—that your father used to sing it to you . . . and then you went right ahead, singing it with the rest of us, and you broke down and cried. I think you did that"—I added with brutality cold enough to astound even myself—"I think you

did that on purpose. You did it just to make Cotton put his arms around you."

She burst into a shriek of laughter. She threw back her head, laughing at the sky, and she kept pounding her clenched fist on the saddle horn.

"Oh, you're wonderful! You are. You're wonderful!"

While I sat sullen and surprised, her mouth was flying wide. "I did that on purpose! Why shouldn't I? I'm a woman—I've got a right to use tears if I want to. My Pop—of course he never sang *Old Dog Tray*; he didn't know it! He was a nice old man. He— All he knew was Nordsky songs; he used to sing those sometimes, but he didn't sing *Old Dog Tray*. I made that up. I did it on purpose!"

I turned toward the barn but had ridden only a few paces when Annie came bounding alongside, still talking furiously. She tried to grab my sleeve; her mare shied quickly, and the girl was almost thrown.

She pulled leather with both hands. Her eyes streamed tears. . . . "I never had nice men to love me before. I didn't know nobody nice! I lived with Pop in that nasty old boarding house in St. Louis . . . Pop was a grain buyer . . . he judged wheat and grain and things for the commission men—but he got to drinking. He went down hill. I didn't have nobody nice! All the men at that place—even the husband of the woman who ran it—they were always trying—Oh, I don't know why I'm telling you these things——"

She raved behind me.

"Nobody nice! Do you hear me? You and Cotton and Vi—you've been— But I guess there weren't any

men like that in St. Louis—not at Mrs. Tussek's place! Pop got so he couldn't pay any board for himself or me, and I worked for two years! Since I was seventeen—I had to work there because we owed a big bill; had to wait table and make beds. I would have gone away somewhere, but I wasn't trained to teach school or be a bookkeeper or anything. Mrs. Tussek said she'd have us pinched if we left without paying up. I had to keep on waiting table and making beds for men that— And then Pop died, and he had three hundred dollars burial insurance. I buried him, and paid the rest of what we owed, and had just enough money to get out here. I thought I could live with Aunt Annie. But they were gone——”

I reined in the horse, and turned to Annie. We were dangerously near Evening Creek and the buildings beyond, so I kept my voice low.

“All right,” I said. “Likely that's all true, and I'm sorry. Still, there's one thing: you deliberately faked that business about *Old Dog Tray* in order to get sympathy out of one of us.”

She had ridden up with me again. Her eyes swelled when I said what I said; she drank in her breath. Her fist came up in a stinging circle. She struck me so hard across the mouth that my upper lip started to bleed.

Bending over Sissy's neck, Annie Lingen rode to the barn: She tried a gallop, but she wasn't quite up to that . . . I pulled back and let her go on ahead at a walk.

By the time I entered the barnyard Annie was out of her saddle and gone to the house.

Violet alone worked in the barn, caring for his treasured Tony. I thought Cotton must be at the

house; but presently he came to us, leading his horse and seeming to have dismounted only a moment before.

"How's Annie, Rich?"

"She's at the house." I busied myself with Quannah's saddle.

Cotton stood behind me. "I was up on the ridge," he said.

I didn't answer.

"Just got worried, Rich. That's all. I was afraid Annie might have had a runaway—you both took so long. What was the trouble, anyway?"

By this time I knew that Violet was beside him. I asked, "What do you mean—trouble?"

"Well, I saw her biff you in the face."

"All right," I said, and turned to face the two of them. "You saw her poke me. What about it? Did you ever have a disagreement with a girl who had a mean temper? You don't need to be worried; I like Annie as well as either one of you—or maybe as well as both of you put together. I won't tell you why she hit me, but it wasn't for the kind of thing you think."

There followed a silence. We could hear the horses feeding eagerly.

"Rich," said Cotton Goss, "don't get me wrong. I know you're mighty fond of that girl. I reckon all three of us are; and we can't blame each other for that."

His hand rested on my shoulder for a moment; then he and Violet walked off without a word.

When we got up to the house, the door of the front bedroom was closed. Muddy said, with some activity of her eyebrows, that Annie had complained

about a headache; she didn't want anything to eat, and had gone to lie down.

She didn't come out all evening, and we men made a miserable time of the jackstraw session with Muddy. I drank more rye than was good for me, and went to bed early in the straw-mow, no matter how much the others tried to urge me to take Cotton's or Vi's bed.

NOT THAT NIGHT BUT THE NEXT, WHEN FOR thirty hours we had been harried secretly by our quarrel, Annie came to me in the barn. It must have been nearly midnight on Monday when I was awakened by light footsteps moving over the littered planks. I sat up quickly—for a few seconds not knowing where I was—and then taking everything into account: cracks under the eaves, the blankets, the deep mound of straw, a brown and star-filled sky beyond the shingles.

Still there continued the progressive rustle of an unknown person's creeping. I put my hand on the big revolver. "All right, who is it?"

A whisper reached me: "Rich, where are you?"

White flames snapped in front of my eyes . . .

"Rich, where are you?"

"What do you want?"

"Don't talk so loud," Annie wailed softly. She kept coming on; and when I hitched around to look over the edge of the mow, I could see her standing small and separate in greater darkness below.

Oklahoma Territory seemed filled with a peculiar iridescence that night: the mass of stars contributed

to it, and so did a reflected paleness of dry landscape outside.

Brittle straw sounded like a crashing thicket as I moved closer to the ladder.

"You're surprised, aren't you?" the little witch-shape was whispering. "You didn't expect me to come."

My throat felt strained and dry. "What time is it?"

"I don't know."

"Is everybody else asleep?"

"Yes."

"What would Mrs. Goss think if she woke up and found you gone?"

Annie Lingen stood black and silent.

I said gruffly, "Oh, all right. The ladder is right there—you can feel for it," and in ensuing quietness I heard her slippers tapping again, and her hands scratching around until she found the slats.

She came up to me . . . her hair was silky and unconfined, and I could discern the shape of the tight black jacket which she had put on over her night-dress. She crushed the straw, and curled on a corner of my blanket.

It seemed that I could smell her hair.

"Rich."

"Yes?"

A horse stamped and blew and turned in its stall.

"I just wanted to tell you I'm sorry," and on Annie's last word her voice went apart and she began to cry.

The miserable problem that faced me went flashing out of existence. I crept to the girl and hunted until I found her hand, and then her body to put my arms around.

"Hell," I cried. "Forget it, Annie."

She wept, "All day long . . . all last night . . . I couldn't forget it. I hit you! It could have been Vi or Cotton; I could have hit them, too—the same way——"

I mumbled, tight against her neck, "Do you love Vi and Cotton?"

"I love all three of you."

"You haven't known us long. Just think—how few hours——"

"Oh, Rich, this is a new world for me—a new life—the kind of life that's got sweet people in it. I didn't have that kind of life—not ever before."

Old Belle came padding through the open door. Together Annie and I listened to the four cushioned feet on the planks. Belle smelled around below—the dog knew that we were there—and then she went out to the pale yard again, waving her tail, giving us her blessing.

"Annie," I cried, "if it had been Vi or Cotton that you quarreled with—If Cot or Vi were sleeping here in the straw, would you have come?"

She lay warm in my arms, and I could feel her heart beating close.

"Yes, Rich. You know I'd come. . . . Some girls never get one man to love. Now I've got three."

I told her that it wouldn't do . . . she couldn't handle human nature like that—there would be hatred, jealousy, rivalry, recrimination——

To my protests Annie answered nothing at all. But when I had ceased complaining, and when I clutched her tighter than ever, she whispered, "Tell me about you, Rich. I know about the Goss boys. But I don't

know anything about you, except that I couldn't let you stay alone out here any longer."

"Oh," I laughed wildly, "if you love like this . . . how many other men have you loved?"

She swore that she had never loved any other men before: that certain other men had tried to make a love with her, but she had never offered her fondness eagerly as she did now.

"It's just gratitude, Annie. You think we've been nice and——"

"Oh, Rich," she wept. "Tell me about you. . . ."

There could be no attempt at wisdom any longer; this was the happiest fate that had ever overtaken man; blindly but worshipfully I embraced it. . . . I muttered through this overwhelming intimacy, telling secrets, as all men will do when they are in love: little things about my boyhood in Kansas and Illinois—my bitter fight for an education, and what I thought was my failure—and other things about the life I lived apart from men. I did not speak my real name, nor reveal why I had come to Oklahoma—and yet I might have informed Annie of even these things if she had asked.

She did not ask. She demanded nothing more except that I return her love. "Annie, Annie, Annie," I cried with her hair in my mouth. . . . Long before morning she was gone away into the house again.

DAY AFTER DAY WE FIVE PEOPLE CLUNG TO our windy isolation, with no one to observe us but the hawks that threatened and darted overhead.

It returns like a dream . . . there are the childish hours which I treasure for myself, recalling every step and word and ring of laughter; and there are the sober interludes—bleak struggles in loneliness with my conscience—which bring only pain with their recollection.

Annie Lingen rode far over the prairie. Her tender body adapted itself with amazing tolerance to the saddle; I know that she was black and blue after her first experience, for I heard her tittering with Muddy in a discussion of saddle-welts which they believed to be secret. But each morning she wanted to ride again, and the stiffness left her joints as she sailed across the grass, flank to flank with Cot or Vi or myself, and often with the three of us.

There was a sewing session during which Annie and Mrs. Goss contrived a divided riding-skirt, shaping it from an old serge dress skirt in Annie's wardrobe. I fancied her more in this costume than I did in overalls;

and the Goss boys looked their appreciation, though they said nothing.

We were in love with her by this time: all three. At night I labored on my straw bed, trying to understand the prevailing situation, to foresee its conclusion. The one was as difficult to do as the other: I had known of men being in love with two or more women at the same time, but it was hard to believe that a girl's affections could be distributed in the same fashion. It was contrary, I cried, to woman's best nature. No one could help cheapening herself beyond hope if she offered such complete affection to three men at once.

But Annie Lingen bloomed as the youngest school girl might have done, once she found herself admired by the male of her choice. Her eyes were silvery-green, laughing forever. I watched jealously (and so the others must have done) for some expression of favoritism; perversely I looked for her to honor Cotton with an extra kiss, or to yield herself too readily to Violet when he came swinging up with silly overtures.

Watch as I might, I could not discover a shade of variation in the open prodigality of her devotion. Whatever favors she gave to either of the Goss boys were awarded with a complete and successful secrecy that matched my own experience with her.

On both Tuesday and Wednesday nights I waited with hot heart in the barn, wondering whether she might come again. Come she would, I was sure—sooner or later—to resume the tenderness of earlier hours.

In my mind it began to be, "When?" after the second night. It might be a week—it might be longer—

and I swore that I would wait if I had to wait until spring.

Our rivalry was buried as deeply as men could bury it. The boys and I were fervently polite to one another—generous, sacrificing beyond the imagination of any idealistic reformer. It was as if a bud of spiritual passion, nourished into religious ideal through the ages, had come to its flower . . . Annie was our evangel. We tried to please her and the power she represented, by searching for kindnesses to do.

Again and again the boys begged me to take one of their beds; they would make jokes about tying me forcibly to a cot in the house. There were no beds to be bought at any of the measly little stores in Pahoka City, or I think Cotton and Vi might have taken a wagon into town and bought one. They tried to beat me to the chore of saddling whichever horse I took out; and Violet rode bareback most of the time for fear I might be needing his saddle.

In return, I broke my neck to do the few farm chores before the boys could get to them. I hid milk pails in the barn before dark, so that I might have the morning's milking accomplished before Cotton and Vi were up. I lugged wood for the kitchen stove until it filled the whole room corner, and Muddy threw up her hands and screeched for me to stop. After meals there was a stampede to see who might assist the women with the kitchen tasks; there was not room for all of us to work at sink or stove together. A strange manifestation, childish, effeminate. . . .

Again we would break loose from housewifely routine, and go tearing across the prairie on the buckskins. We held shooting matches until I only had five car-

tridges left besides the five in my gun, and had to stop. Thereupon the boys urged their weapons on me.

They broke out cartons of brass-jacketed shells, of which they seemed to have an inexhaustible supply stacked beneath the sink; and Annie as well as myself worked toward proficiency with Cotton's .44 and Violet's .38. The girl had never fired a revolver until she came to that farm, but she had the knack for shooting; though it was a wonder she hit anything, with all of us coaching her at once.

The days were an extended frolic. I never heard so much laughter crowded into the compass of so few lives and for so brief a time. Two generations have come along since then . . . still I close my eyes, and little jeers and jokes and baby humors come trickling from the past, with Annie's tones wiry and important among them. . . . Over our drinks we would laugh; over our mashed potatoes too; endlessly we asked Belle whether she would rather be a dead dog or a Republican, and invariably she chose to be a dead dog.

Crude animal-shadows we made at night on the papered wall behind the big lamp, with Violet's mule assaulted by my crocodile and successfully defending himself with his fore-feet. There were poems which Annie had learned, and she would recite them while we sat enthusiastic with rye in our glasses: "The Wreck of the Hesperus," "The Skeleton in Armor," (both of which Annie had learned in school) and "Lasca," which she cut out of a magazine and pinned up on the pantry wall at the St. Louis boarding house, until she knew all the verses by heart. The boys and Muddy liked "Lasca" best.

Violet sang a good deal those days. Cotton and I

felt that he exercised a romantic advantage over us. When Vi was alone with Annie out in the grassland, they were apt to take their horses at a walk, Annie adoring him as his voice soared to the sun. He sang her own song, *Gentle Annie* . . . they would come toward us, the wind making tangles out of Annie's bright hair, the tumbleweeds bounding like rabbits ahead. Cotton and I sat to listen.

*Thou art gone, alas, like the many
That have bloomed in the summer of my heart.*

Though she was by no means gone; she was warm among us to our peril, and our delight.

To my peril, perhaps, more especially. In darkness of the mow I lay staring at the strips of speckled sky beneath the eaves . . . there was a job to do, I had to do it, I should plunge vengefully into it before any more days passed. . . . Yet the sunrise would find me undecided, worn by turmoil of spirit, eager to postpone the ugliness of the future by descending (one extra day only: I said that several times) into the fantastic childhood which clamed us all.

There was the matter of Barrow and his five-dollar bill. I tried to find ways of dealing with that. I named a dozen series of circumstances by which Violet Goss had most innocently become the possessor of that frayed greenback: he got it in the blackjack game, he got it in change over the bar at Cookson's; he received it when he broke a twenty-dollar bill at Kite's, at the express office, at the grocery store, at the barber shop.

The bill had been frayed by excessive handling—it had been buttoned into a wallet that left one end exposed, and thus it had been torn in the possessor's

pocket. Those were not burns or powder upon the bill; they were spots of food or chemicals spilled in a Tulsa restaurant or a Kansas City drugstore.

Muddy had clipped the little scraps of linen out of a hundred pieces of innocent cloth, and for a hundred logical purposes. The Goss boys had never even considered stepping across the boundaries of society and making train robbers of themselves. The only train-robbing done in that family had been committed by George Goss, and that quite legitimately in Virginia and in time of war, and under leadership of the honored Mosby.

The Goss boys had pastured whole herds of cattle which they did not mention at present; they had sold thousands of head at fancy prices. Violet had played blackjack for exorbitant stakes and won fortunes from cattlemen of the Pahoka City area. . . . His life was futile and nonsensical—judged in terms of service to the world—and so was the life his brother led. But in mysterious fashion both men were now, with lonely and carefree indolence, enjoying the reward of hard work and years shrewdly spent.

Thus I tried to delude myself. Often I did succeed for as much as an hour at a time. Still I could not get out of my mind the threat represented by old Mr. Barrow, and that threat hovered behind me with a sharp-tined fork.

I didn't know, of course, whether Lucian Barrow would be possessed, in sober state, of the same conviction which had ridden him when he was drunk. As long as I was weak enough to put off my promised excursion to Pahoka City, I could only watch the road past the willows with growing fear. I stiffened to in-

stant attention when Annie or one of the boys lifted against the skyline in some unexpected quarter.

Wednesday evening Violet and I had a rather bad time. Cotton had disappeared with Annie when we were all ranging far up Evening Creek, and all our shouting couldn't fetch them back. Nor did any little sorties which we made into the surrounding gullies (explorations we tried to conceal from each other) fetch them back. At last we had to traipse to the farm alone; and we sat on the porch watching the dusk deepen.

Neither of us dared mention the missing pair, but Violet's mind was probably as occupied with jealous imaginings as mine. It was dead dark, and Muddy was frying ham, before we heard Cotton and Annie calling back and forth in the corral. I remember that Violet poured himself a stiff slug of rye a moment later; and that was the only time he failed to offer a drink to me.

When the others came in, they had a long story about Sissy getting a stone in her foot, and what a job it was to get it out again. Annie was more affectionate than usual with Violet and me; she insisted on kissing all three of us men before she went to bed.

"Rich," she said, when she put her lips against mine, "you're the steadiest. You're like marble or something—like the Rock of Ages. That's why I love you."

Muddy asked whether I liked being a Rock of Ages, and I said that it didn't matter so long as I was kissed.

"And Cotton," said Annie, kissing him. "He's the most affectionate. He doesn't look it, but he is. He was the first to hug me; I won't forget that."

She lingered over her kiss with Violet, and said that she loved him because he was gayest and wildest.

"I would rather," she cried positively, "live here than do anything else!"

"Even than go to the Pan-American Exposition?" asked Muddy.

The women had been reading about the Exposition in an old newspaper that morning, and saying how wonderful it would be to see those buildings.

"Yes," said Annie, "even than go to the Exposition." She kissed Muddy last and most tenderly; her eager face turned to us before she closed the bedroom door. Violet upset two glasses and rolled them off the table, though ordinarily he was never clumsy.

THE NEXT MORNING CAME CLEAR AND CALM; FOR the first time that week there was no suggestion of wind. When I climbed down from the mow and went to wash at the creek, the sky was opalescent, patterned with delicate clouds, but these were gone by the time I had finished milking. . . . Man might seek any number of dreams in the yellowness of such a morning, and be half convinced that he had found them.

I carried milk to the porch. The door opened and to my surprise Cotton stepped out, fully dressed. Usually it was Violet who joined me first in the barnyard.

Disgust was written all over Cotton's face. "Look at this," and he handed me a torn sheet of wrapping paper.

He had found the paper displayed with sugar bowl, vinegar cruets, and salt and pepper shakers weighting the four corners. Muddy was up, in her old pink and white calico wrapper, pumping water at the sink. She squalled with laughter over the message which Cottonwood found.

The legend on the wrapping paper was written

with red crayola: there were a lot of broken crayons dating back to the boys' childhood, scattered among jackstraws and other games they kept in a cupboard. A picture had been drawn on the sheet with conscious attempt at crudeness; I thought that I perceived the hand of Annie Lingen. It was entitled, "A Pik-nik" and underneath it said, "Annie+Vi."

The drawing itself showed two weird creatures with round heads and sticks for arms and legs. One of the creatures was wearing a dress. They sat with a little square between them, and on the square there seemed to be cookies, apples, and things like that.

As I examined this announcement of stolen holiday, my amusement yielded to the same annoyance expressed in Cotton's face. I thought of Violet and Annie Lingen laughing at us from some secret grove of prairie trees or—worse—in some hidden clump of hazel-brush. I didn't enjoy the thought . . . resting in the grass . . . she would be kissing him, perhaps, with no one to restrain her.

"That's a hell of a picture," said Cotton Goss. "I reckon Vi drew it."

"Looks more like Annie's work to me."

He grunted, "You'd think they were ten years old, to leave a picture like that."

I told him that all the horses were still on the place; I had just turned them out.

"Oh, those folks wanted to go alone," he said. "They would have roused you up if they went after the horses. No, they went afoot, and God knows where."

I couldn't help thinking of the previous evening.

"That's what Vi and I were saying about you last night."

Cotton seemed hurt. "Sissy had a stone under her shoe. I thought I told you that." He walked off the porch and down to the barn.

I went into the kitchen and ran milk through the strainer. Muddy tried to make wholly unintelligible conversation with me through her mouthful of hair-pins. Cotton soon reappeared, and eventually we had a disheartened breakfast, though Mrs. Goss was sprightly.

She expressed amusement at the cleverness with which Violet and Annie had stolen out on the rest of us.

"Well enough, Muddy," said Cot, with some anger, "tee-hee all you want to! I don't think it's cute. If they wanted a picnic they ought to have let us come along."

Muddy said it was cute the way they did it. "The way they snuck! I give you my vow I never heard a whisper—just got up and found that little baggage of an Annie flown and dressed. Then I come out here and there was bread and cheese and cold meat and pie setting here that they had left when they fixed their collation."

"I'll collate Vi, if I catch him," muttered Cotton. . . . Muddy's eyes laughed still and declared that this was the best joke in the world.

I didn't think it was, but I stood amazed at the gloom in which Cotton submerged himself. While I chopped wood he sat sullen as an old toad, mending a bridle with patent rivets.

"Men in love," said Muddy, when I went to beg

some hot water, "are nothing but kids. They can wherrit the daylight out of anybody."

I said, "It's awkward for three fellows to be after the same girl."

She pursed up her plump little mouth. "Got to give and take in this life, Rich. I shouldn't wonder but what Cotton enjoyed taking yesterday. Now let him give, for a change. He'll teach himself to do it, too. . . . My boys have never quarreled, Rich, except for piddling little fusses when very young."

On the porch I poured the water into a wash-basin which we used for shaving. A mirror hung against the house wall, high but tilted down; and in this mirror, as I started to lather my face, I could see Cotton hunched on the edge of the porch behind me.

He was tracing circles in the dirt, as he had done that day when he told me about the shooting of his father.

I had not finished rubbing suds into my beard-stubble, when Cotton rose suddenly and stamped the dust off his boots. "Let Wally Appleton do that," he said, brightly.

"Who's Wally Appleton?"

"Reckon he shaved you last Saturday when you got trimmed in Pahoka. He's the barber."

"You mean go to town? Why don't I go ahead and shave first?"

He cried with impatience, "Oh, come on, Rich! I'll stand treat for the shave. Muddy," he cried at the open door, "we're going to Pahoka. You scratch out your list of groceries."

I put away my shaving things and followed Cotton

to the stable. He had backed Quannah between the shafts of the light buggy, and was buckling the harness.

"You all ready?"

"Yes."

His gray glance roved over me. "Get your gun on."

"You think I'll need it?"

"Get your gun on," he said again.

I swung into the mow and got my revolver belt while Cotton was backing horse and buggy into the yard. I climbed over the left wheel and sat beside him. He drove up and stopped near the house. "Hold them." He put the ribbons in my hands, jumped to the ground, walked into the house.

When he re-emerged he was spinning a big black hat on his forefinger.

"Just thought I'd take Brew Tatum his headwear. He might catch the pip without it."

Muddy trotted after him with grocery list in hand. She gave the paper to Cotton and beamed at us both. "One thing extra you add to that list," she ordered explosively, "if it's to be found in The City! I want a phonograph and lots of cylinders to play on it. Bands and marches: I like them best, and scarcely ever get to witness them."

"Mud," said Cotton, "I reckon I'll buy you the grammiest gramophone that ever squawked. You tell Vi and Annie to go to the devil: we won't even let them play it. Will we, Rich?"

"No." I was glad that his sulky mood had vanished.

Muddy said, quietly but earnestly, "That's more the talk I like to hear, Cot. 'Thou shall love thy brother'—that's what it says in the Scriptures."

Her son laughed. "You wouldn't know a Scripture if one jumped up and bit you." Muddy scatted us away with her dish towel. Cotton put Quanah into a gallop and we rocked toward the main road.

DESPITE THE IMPROVEMENT IN HIS MOOD, Cotton didn't talk much on the way to town. His silence led me into reflections of my own: I had to decide what to do about Lucian Barrow. If the Goss boys were innocent, I had to lead Mr. Barrow up against a stone wall and leave him there.

If the boys were guilty . . . that was something else again. At least I must stop the dissipated old wretch before he overplayed his hand and mine, and brought unseemly outrage into a situation which might prove tragic at best.

The main street of Pahoka City lay bleaching and barren, with fewer teams and saddle horses than there had been on Saturday. No customers waited at the barber shop. Wally Appleton, in frayed linen coat, stood curling his own mustache in front of a greasy mirror.

Cotton and I matched coins to see who would be first in the chair; Cotton won. That gave me a chance to go back to the washroom, and in its disagreeable precinct I opened up my shirt and sought a tightly buttoned pouch of my money-belt. There I kept my

detective's badge, my commission as a Special Deputy United States Marshal for that district, and certain other papers. I removed the badge and put it in my trousers pocket, then I went back to the front and read *The Wide World* magazine until Cotton was out of the chair.

I had a shave and a much needed hair-trim while Cotton Goss shopped for groceries across the way. I could see him coming out with a boy from the store and stacking things under the buggy seat. . . . The barber's voice pattered on, telling the news of the week, telling what he thought of Leon Czolgosz, suggesting appropriate tortures.

He recited with avidity all details of the autopsy; our President had died of peritonitis. Czolgosz had been formally indicted; crowds surrounded the jail, wishing to lynch him, and I could just picture that barber in such a crowd. He was one with the imbeciles who swarmed through a certain California street, dragging a dummy labeled "William Randolph Hearst," to burn with noisy ceremony . . . I couldn't see just how that helped the dead McKinley or hurt the living assassin.

Then the barber began a series of slighting remarks directed against President Roosevelt. I tried to shut him up by saying that I thought T. R. would do a good job.

"It's a big job, Mister. Too big for Teddy!"

When I didn't answer, the scissors clipped sedately for a time.

"Good job you got at the Goss place?" the barber asked.

I told him that it was all right.

"They don't do much farming any more, do they?"

"Enough."

He led around to the inevitable discussion of gold on the Goss land, but I didn't have much patience with this. I told him that I hadn't seen any gold, and that my employers never discussed hidden mines with me.

Wally Appleton sprinkled bay rum gingerly. He seemed to be low on bay rum, and customers were few these days. "Folks believe the Gosses have got a secret income, though."

"Any income they've got is a secret, far as I'm concerned," I said. "I wasn't hired to ask questions."

While the barber was digging up change for my dollar bill, Cotton signaled me through the window. I went out and met him in the middle of the road. As we stood there talking, men watched us from three or four windows and doorways. There wasn't much to occupy the casual curiosity of Pahoka City. No wonder that strange tales were told about Vi and Cotton . . . in this moment the town's gossip seemed almost a certificate of innocence for them.

"Rich, I got you a little present. It's in the buggy. I reckon you won't mind if you take part of your pay in found."

"What did you get?"

"Shells for that Bisley model Colt of yours—six boxes. You can shoot Violet off his high-horse, and win a lot of quarters from him."

He had made inquiries: people in the grocery shop thought there might be a phonograph for sale at Ole Flugstad's Racket Store. A family who had just left

the neighborhood were said to have disposed of their machine to Ole.

"Reckon I'll take a look at it," said Cotton. "You want to come along and hear the cylinders?"

"No, I'll go and chew the rag a few minutes with old man Barrow."

Cotton stared incredulously.

I explained, "He was the first person I talked to in town. Told him I'd drop in, if I got a job around here anywhere."

"Then you meet me at Ole's place."

Cotton pointed out the crazy building which housed Lucian Barrow: it was almost directly across from Cookson's Bar and a little to the north, where a road crossed Main Street and spilled down the east slope.

The door of Mr. Barrow's store and photographic parlor stuck slightly. At first I thought it was locked, but when no one answered my knock, I found that I could push the door open. The room was gloomy, thick with the smell of chemicals, thick with bad air. Halfway down the chamber a faded calico curtain hung upon a wire, blocking off the studio and living quarters beyond. I could see a skylight, leaky and homemade, hacked into the ceiling and wall.

I called, "Mr. Barrow," and had to repeat the name two or three times before I got an answering mumble from behind the curtain. While waiting for the old man to appear, I examined the few shelves of paints, varnishes and cheap patent medicines along the south side of the room. There was a battered counter with nothing on it but sheets of newspaper and a ball of

string. I turned to the north wall and was faced with mementoes of Lucian Barrow's past.

Photographs hung there—dozens of them; some few framed under glass, and others tacked on cards against the peeling wallpaper. A few scenes were obviously relics of the man's Civil War experience—reproduced from old-fashioned wet-plate negatives, probably, and flyspecked by the myriad insects that had lived and died since Mr. Barrow set up shop in Pahoka City. There were views of forts and batteries; there were a few companies of troops standing on dress-parade; and in one picture I recognized Matthew Brady himself, in his famous straw hat and duster.

Back along the wall I roved, wondering at the macabre taste of the old cameraman. In later days he had displayed a singular interest in taking pictures of dead outlaws, and live ones too. There was a picture of Belle Starr, wearing her guns. He had taken that himself in Fort Smith, Arkansas, for the card bore his ornate printed signature. There were other rapscale lions whom I did not recognize; there were the faces of dead men with their eyes open. *Sig Turnbull. Killed at Hennessy, Okla. Terr. Sept. 5, 1892. Had shot Marshal Main.* The legend appeared written in faded ink across the bottom of the picture, and Sig Turnbull's eyes seemed laughing at you; even in death he did not resent the fact that his shirt had been stripped from his body to reveal a charge of buckshot blown into him. . . . The next photo was a street scene: a dead man lay with his shoes toward the camera, and a dozen citizens in round-crowned hats were gathered in semi-circle behind the corpse. *Billy Wentworth 30*

min. after his death on sidewalk at Fort Smith March 27, 1885. Had slain 5 men and 1 woman in his time.

I didn't want to look at any more dead outlaws; this was giving me the horrors. I walked to the curtain, drew it aside and peered into the space beyond. It smelled like a cellar with lizards in it. There stood cameras and a faded "background," horrible in detail, on a slice of canvas scenery: urn with flowers, palm trees, a marble colonnade.

But this grotesque scenery did not interest me as much as the spectacle presented by Lucian Barrow himself, who lay stretched on a sagging couch with two bottles and a dishpan on the floor beside him.

He mumbled something, sighed, and turned his face away.

I went over to the sofa. "Mr. Barrow," I said, "it's Rich Williams."

He nodded, though he kept his eyes shut. This was the first time I had seen him without his glasses on, and his face seemed more like soiled yellow wax than ever.

I spoke my name again.

"Yes," he sighed. "I know. Let me alone, son: I got to rest a while."

"No," I told him flatly. "You'll have to wake up and sit up. I must talk to you."

The old man made a supreme effort. He bent his shivering knees and dropped his feet on the floor. A ragged sock was on one foot; the other was bare. His shoes and glasses were under the couch; he fumbled for his spectacles, and I had to find them for him.

When he got the spectacles firmly planted on his

gaunt nose and the bows hooked over his ears, he peered at me with disbelief. "You said it was you. But I wasn't sure."

"What about that bill? Did you show it to anyone yet?"

"No."

"Did you tell anybody about it?"

"No." And then, with some spirit, "Why should I tell anybody about it? You and me—we're going to collect that reward. Five hundred dollars! Maybe more."

"All right," I said. "Where's the bill?"

He tried to stand. I had to help him to his feet and guide him the first few steps. Then he shook me off impatiently and made his way toward a yellow-painted washstand in the corner. He peeled back rotten oilcloth and produced his bank note.

I examined it carefully: it did seem to have been in an explosion. It was burned and frayed on one margin, in a most peculiar manner. That was long before the days when laboratories and microscopes were commonly employed in crime detection . . . I really couldn't tell a thing. Here was a five-dollar bill, a little marred and battered. No one might have noticed its condition unless he examined it closely.

"This doesn't prove anything," I said. My voice sounded sharp beneath the cobwebby ceiling.

The old man blinked stupidly, and then futile rage showed in his face.

"That's what you think, is it? All right, Mister Williams! Maybe other folks will think different. I tell you," and he scowled his determination, "I'm going to get that money-reward for turning in those

train robbers! I've been a man of some substance in my time, and I'm going to have substance again, God willing! It isn't any fun at my age to be kicked around by Charley Tatum because I can't pay ready cash for a bottle of cheer!"

I put my hand on the trembling skeleton arm within his ragged sleeve. "You sit tight. Nobody will kick you around. If there's a reward to be had, I'll see that you get your share."

"Oh, you will, will you?"

"But you'll have to put a padlock on that mouth of yours, my friend."

He shook with loose laughter. "Sonny, you talk big for a hired man—for a 'bo that was kicked off the blind baggage——"

I said, recognizing that I would have to go the limit: "I'm no hobo. I'm a detective for the South Central and Western Railroad. I'm also deputized by the United States Marshal's office," and I showed my badge.

His eyes winked, peering at the embossed, silvery metal. He fingered the badge and made a little sucking sound between his fangs. "Why didn't you show me this badge afore? Why didn't you say you was an officer?"

"My instructions were to reveal my identity to no one. You're the first to know about me around here—and you'll be the last for a while!" At this point I had to romanticize in order to convey the necessary effect. "Are you familiar with the crime of obstructing justice?"

He muttered that he had heard of something like that.

I put the badge in my pocket. "I'll make you acquainted with the situation, Mr. Barrow. The crime of obstruction of justice carries with it a ten-year sentence in the Federal penitentiary. If you so much as whisper to anyone about my being an investigator, you'll automatically be guilty of that crime, and I shall have you remanded for trial."

Probably I made it stronger than I should have done, but I felt only a melodramatic injunction of this sort would impress the old man. He promptly burst into tears, and I had hard work to quiet him down. He wobbled after me to the door, swearing that drunk or sober he would never breathe a word to a soul.

Whether he was sober now I could not tell—or whether, in fact, he was ever sober. I was taking a chance, but I dared not leave such a dissolute and irresponsible man roaming at large with dreams of important evidence and immediate cash reward.

Right then and there I should have taken that five-dollar bill with me for safekeeping, but I didn't do it. If such an idea entered my mind (I cannot remember that it did) it was dispelled instantly by the knowledge that Mr. Barrow would have screamed at the mere suggestion. The bill represented his every hope for the future; certainly he would never have parted with it.

I thought the warning I had given should hold the old photographer for another five or six days. After that— Things had to be settled before that time, one way or the other. I had to see that they were settled.

LEFT MR. BARROW GASPING FEARFUL EJACULATIONS about his own trustworthy qualities, and went down the street to the Racket Store.

A screeching yowl assailed me. Cotton Goss and the proprietor had placed a phonograph on one of the front counters. The big horn hung like a morning-glory from its crane and the cylinder buzzed beneath the needle. Several customers, Indians among them, stood listening.

This popular tune which was now being played concerned a darky who whistled his way through life; members of the orchestra joined to provide the whistling refrain. The soloist ranted and chattered—half man's voice, half woman's voice, senseless and inhuman.

*. . . started for the coon.
But he began once more
As they threw him out the door,
And whistled up the same familiar tune.*

"How's that sound, Rich?" called Cotton above the ensuing chorus of whistling.

"It sounds all right to me."

"Think Mud will like it?"

"She spoke about bands and marches."

Cotton said, "Ole's got those too—eighteen cylinders in all. There's a harmony band, and *General Grant's Grand March*—I don't know just how she'll like that, seeing it's about a Yankee—and *Seated One Day at the Organ*, and a lot more. There's another march: something about cavalry. Want to hear that?"

I said that I would hear them all, out at the house, if he bought the machine.

"It's already bought," said Cotton. "I just paid Ole forty-five dollars for the lot."

He carried the phonograph proudly up the street and I brought along the detachable horn and a wooden box containing the eighteen record-cylinders. When we had put these things into the buggy, Cotton brushed Brew Tatum's hat from under the seat.

"I nigh forgot this. You know I said that Brew might take cold without it. Well, I better take it to him. You want to come?"

Without waiting for a reply, he sauntered lightly in the direction of Cookson's. Four doors to the north I could see a painted sign sticking out from a building's false front:

Brewster Tatum. Notary. Real Estate. Loans.

For a moment I was at a loss. If I accompanied Cotton and there was any fighting or passing of threats, it might react unfavorably upon me at a time when I was compelled to resort to the assistance of Pahoka City officialdom. Nevertheless I was bound to retain Cotton's friendship and respect; he might resent it if I failed to go with him.

Beyond all this, I had a natural desire to get a look at Brewster Tatum and to see his face when this jaunty blood-enemy offered the missing hat.

Cotton Goss was already several stores away from me. I seized a railing and swung up to the high wooden sidewalk which lay like a platform before the buildings.

My eyes were on Cotton, ahead. I didn't notice the men who waited beside a certain doorway, nor did I observe just which store I was passing. I was conscious that I had walked beneath the shadow of a wooden awning——

The attack came suddenly. Fingers gripped my shirt collar at the back, and wrenched the wool cloth against my throat. A button flew off. I twisted down and away, turning my head to try to see the man who had grasped me.

It was Charley Tatum: I might have known that. Apparently he had been standing with two other men outside his own saloon door, and had merely to reach out his long arm when I was a step or two past him.

"You're the fellow," he said, "that tripped me last Saturday."

He outweighed me at least seventy-five pounds; his reach was so long that I couldn't even hit him. He had used his right hand to snatch my collar, so I did the only thing I could do. I got his left wrist with my own left hand, and pulled his arm straight out and then snapped it down. I squatted low, with my shoulder against his chest. . . . Somebody yelled, "Get out of the way!" and feet were running . . . running away from us instead of toward us.

A smaller man . . . if Charley Tatum had weighed

less and had not been so tall and wide, I might have thrown him over my head. His right hand, still clenched, tore the collar cleanly off my shirt. My soles crushed hard against the loose board sidewalk. . . . Tatum spun around twice as I whirled him away.

With a crash he brought up against one of the wooden awning posts; slivers of the shattered timber went through his sleeve, and for a moment I thought that they had impaled his flesh as well. The awning sagged and creaked above our heads. People were still running noisily away; they must have expected gun-talk in the next second.

I remember three things: Cotton Goss gazing back at us; and I remember a fat Indian woman who got down on her knees behind a wagon across the street. And clearly I remember Charley Tatum's wide, red, fleshy face, not unhandsome in its rage and meatiness.

He clutched the broken post, still struggling to keep his balance, staring with puffy eyes. Probably he had never run up against any Japanese wrestling tricks before.

He would have gone for his gun but I didn't give him time. I knew which pocket he kept it in—he had showed me himself, on Saturday in the barroom. I was on him in a minute and had his gun before he could keep me from getting it, though I tore the pocket out of his coat when my hand went around the weapon.

Tatum didn't move after I jumped back with the revolver. His eyes didn't leave mine. He had instigated this row, but it moved faster than he had expected: now he thought he was facing death. His eyes seemed to push in and out of their sockets . . . *is he going to*

shoot? You could see that thought hovering like a bird—a momentary winged question in the brain behind the swollen face. . . . *He's going to shoot me.*

"I could," I said. "You know that, don't you?"

His fat white lips tried to grin. He took a step forward, holding out one hand with palm spread.

He sobbed, "All right, you're wearing iron today! Give me my gun and we'll step down in the road—if you got nerve enough."

I said, "Tatum, you don't know me. If you did, you wouldn't say that. I hope you don't represent the law and order of your city. If you do, you'll land in hot water and never get out."

I swung the cylinder of his revolver, ejected the cartridges and scattered them in the street.

"This is the second time I know of," I told him, "that you've had a gun taken away from you. This time it goes higher than the bar." I reached out and tossed Tatum's gun into the air, high past the edge of the awning. We heard the revolver thud down on the flat saloon roof; I hoped that it was broken by such treatment, and probably it was.

Charley Tatum was still struggling to smile; his eyes were marbles. "That's just too bad," he breathed. "And me with only a dozen guns to my name!"

There was a tin beer sign tacked against the boards outside the barroom. I glanced through the window. The bar would stop bullets . . . nobody would get hurt in the building beyond. I pulled my Colt and fired three times at the beer sign.

I would have emptied the cylinder, but a couple of shells had to be saved for Charley Tatum in case of more trouble. Three holes appeared in the foam of

beer on the sign . . . in the back of my mind I wished that Violet was there. He would have had to pay me another quarter; that beer foam was only about as large as an elongated silver dollar.

Charley Tatum looked at the sign. His color changed, though he tried to laugh. "You'll get yourself in jail. It's against the law to plug holes in people's business buildings."

I slid my revolver into its holster and walked to join Cotton Goss. He stood with the widest smile on his face, and I noticed that the folds of his coat swung back again as he took his left hand away. He looked me over critically.

"I reckon Charley Tatum owes you a new shirt; but you owe him a suit-coat, so we'll call it even. Come on," he said. "Let's shovel the Tatums off of us, and not worry about them any more."

People were beginning to ooze out of the stores. I could see Wally Appleton sliding from the barber shop, brush and comb frozen in his hands. His customer, whoever it might be, had his face against the window glass inside. We could feel plenty of other eyes on us, but no one offered a word.

Brewster Tatum had come out of his office at the sound of the shots, and had retreated again. . . . Now he lumbered across the floor, stumbling away from us when we entered unexpectedly, and grabbing for the knob of a closet door beyond his roll-top desk. Maybe he had a gun in that closet; I don't know.

I had a swift glimpse of his face beyond the litter of desks and tables and maps and papers. Brew Tatum looked a good deal like Charley, but he was years older and his hair was mostly gone. He was fatter and more

savage-looking and not so tall; he seemed to have "cattleman" written all over him, but not in a nice way.

There was one other person in the office: Mr. Prescott, who had sat in Saturday's blackjack game at Cookson's Bar. Mr. Prescott stood in front of a letter press, his thumbs hooked into his vest pockets, the way he held them before.

We nodded at Prescott. "Tatum," said Cotton, conversationally, "have you heard the political news today? They say Teddy isn't going to cut down the representation of the South in Congress after all. Keep your hands off of that closet; they might get bit by a mouse in there."

The older man puffed his cheeks, "You bastard," he whispered, and I think that took courage of a kind.

"Don't go calling mean names, Mister Tatum. I've done brought you a present," said Cotton, and he spun the hat across the desk. "You didn't expect to see that, did you? Now you keep out of our willows: you got your hat back, and no need to come again."

He bowed at Mr. Prescott; then we both walked down the street, keeping out in the middle of the road.

I flashed a glance at Cookson's Bar.

"Don't worry about Charley," said Cotton, scarcely moving his wide thin lips. "He won't come out a-shooting. He's really only dangerous when in temper. I reckon you got him quieted by now."

We climbed into the buggy and drove down the hill and out on the prairie. I filled my cartridge belt with the shells which Cotton had bought for me. Only once did Cotton say anything on the way home, except to speak to the horse. That was when we went

over a slight ridge about four miles west of town, and when we saw the long land rolling and burnt by the sun ahead.

Cotton lifted his face and I saw his gaze wander affectionately across the few clumps of willows, and out to the misty blue den where the Goss farm lay hidden.

If he had broken the ordinary bonds which kept him from expressing sentiment, I should not have been surprised. I was surprised at what he did say. He breathed, "Rich, let's all go to Buffalo, New York. To the Exposition."

I turned closer as the thought struck me that perhaps he wasn't joking after all. He said nothing more. He watched the horse and the road ahead; the next words he uttered were to the white-starred collie when she rushed to welcome us vociferously.

VIOLET AND ANNIE WERE AT HOME; HAD BEEN since about ten o'clock. Annie was at a tub in the backyard, doing her washing when we arrived. Violet came around the house. I suppose he had been watching Annie and pestering her with offers of help.

I saw him look at my torn shirt, but Cotton didn't at first recount the adventure. He was filled with the excitement of presenting his mother with her gramophone.

We let Quanah stand, still hitched to the buggy, while we carried the gramophone in triumph to the porch and set it up on the wash bench. Muddy was jumping up and down, and shaking the whole porch when she did it.

The moment we got the horn in place and applied the needle to a cylinder entitled, *Custer's Last Stand*—the moment a burst of brass flung itself into the air, Quanah reared and bolted. He rushed toward the barn with us three men tearing after him, and then made a quick turn when he realized that he was still hitched to the buggy. The buggy went over with a bang. Quanah snapped one shaft and tore the tugs

loose. He brought up unhurt, trembling and disgusted, against the fence of the cow-lot.

For once the Goss boys were stumped, and didn't swear very much. Cotton soothed the frightened horse; we unharnessed Quannah and turned him into the corral, and then came back to survey the buggy.

"After all," said Vi, "it's just a shaft! He didn't even knock loose the wheels on the off side."

Cotton said, "You talk as if shafts grew on trees."

"Well, don't they?" retorted Violet. "Anyway, we can buy another pair." He went singing up to the house with more-or-less damaged groceries in his arms.

We continued our concert. The instrument blared and whooped all through the preparation of a belated dinner. Muddy ordered march after march; her eyes were bullet-bright; she swaggered around the kitchen as she worked, waving her fork like a drum major.

I didn't like *Custer's Last Stand*, and said so. I had especial reasons for not caring about a Custer piece, though Violet defended the selection while he was gobbling his frankfurters and potatoes.

"It's like real," he declared, and Annie thought so too. "First you hear the soldiers. Then you hear the war dance, and then cavalry a-marching, and finally the fight. You can even hear shooting, and the bugle call at the end. It's right sad—and pretty, too."

"That's where my father was killed," I said.

Muddy gasped, "At the Little Big Horn with Custer?"

"Yes."

"For God's sake!" cried Violet. "Why didn't you say so?"

Cotton stared at me for a long moment and then got up from the table. He walked out through the open door to the porch, and I saw him fumbling around; he tossed something far toward the rock pile by the fence. A feminine voice, living for the minute inside the phonograph horn, was caterwauling *The Lost Chord*, but distinctly I heard the smash of a breaking cylinder on the rocks. Cotton came back to his place again, seeming relieved.

We ate in silence until *The Lost Chord* was done and then Violet went out to put on, *Peekaboo, Peekaboo, Come From Behind the Chair*.

Annie talked delightedly about her picnic with Vi, and Vi rolled his eyes at Cotton and me as she did so.

"I've only got this to say," said Cotton. "I don't think it's fair for some to go on a picnic, and others not to get to. Isn't that so, Rich?"

"Leave me out of it," I said. "I'll discuss anything else, even Charley Tatum."

We had been doing that, off and on, ever since we calmed down after the runaway. Cotton recited the story with unexpected dramatic color, and I found that my own courage and agility lost nothing in his telling. "If I ever need a press agent," I said to Cotton, "I'll hire you."

The Gosses wanted to know what a press agent was, and Annie explained.

Cotton grinned at me affectionately. "I'll go you, Rich: take the job as press agent, any time you say."

The Goss brothers didn't offer to help Muddy clear away the dinner things when we were through with the meal. Cotton must have given Violet a sign. They went outside together, and not with Annie either;

she was singing over her laundry in the backyard.

While Muddy washed the dishes and I wiped, I could observe the Goss boys strolling together in a circle at the lane gate. Violet, the taller, had his hand on Cot's shoulder some of the time; again they would stop and bend serious faces; Cot would draw lines with his boot toes in the dirt while he talked.

They came back to the house before we were through with the dishes. "Mud," said Violet, "Cot and I are going to take a ride."

Muddy glanced at them both and then her eyes went stealing past me and to the north window, where Annie could be seen. "Are you argufying?" she asked the boys.

"Just a mite," replied Cotton. "We'll be back before long."

When the dishes were done, I went out in the north yard and sat on an old iron kettle, watching Annie Lingen's arms in their wreathing of suds. A slight wind had come up. Sometimes bubbles blew from the thick froth and swung for a few seconds in the air before they vanished.

Annie smiled at me over her work. She was singing. It sounded like gibberish to me.

"What is that song?"

"Nordsky song—Pop used to sing it." She threw back her head, and her laughter trilled. "I mean that, honest," she cried with her face pink. "He did really sing *that* song sometimes when I was little."

"What's it about?"

"I can't exactly remember. Something about fairies in Norway, I guess." She slapped the last wad of

clothing into the rinsing tub and ran to me, stretching her hands behind her so that I wouldn't get wet.

"Rich, kiss me."

I did—a little peck.

"That's not much of a kiss, Rich Williams. You did better when we were spooning the other night."

"I can't spoon unless I put my arms around you—and you're all soaked."

"I'll wipe the soap off right away! Rich, you're not mad because I went off with Vi this morning? You've got to promise me that you boys will never get mad at each other. Not ever!"

"At least I could never be mad at you," but a cloud seemed to fold us after I said the words.

She wrung water from the last garment, and fastened it with wooden pins on the little rope that served as a clothes-line. Aprons and petticoats and other things flapped at the farther end of the rope. They were almost dry.

"Annie Lingen," I said quietly, "I'll never be angry with you—but I'm afraid you're going to hate me."

Her soft lips spread apart, and she made a face. "Rich, why do you say that? You know I love you."

"I don't know," I told her miserably. "It's just a notion."

"Then please don't get any more notions." She wiped her arms on the skirt of her gingham dress, and came to put her lips against mine.

So we stood loving each other, when a volley of Comanche yells resounded from beyond Evening Creek. We ran to the front yard for a better view. . . . The Goss boys were speeding toward us, waving

their hats, shrieking fit to raise the dead. Violet was bareback on Tony, as he so often went; and while the pony galloped I saw him with his arm across the buckskin's neck, flopping like a wild Indian below the withers, first on one side and then on the other.

The hoofs poured down the steep slope; they splashed the creek, and then came springing across the trampled ground behind the barn. Cotton kicked the gate open. The boys thundered through the barn, and out again and toward us, yelling like demons.

I looked at Muddy on the porch. Her seamed face was squeezed with delight. She put her hands over her ears; and in the yard below her, Belle Starr was going crazy.

The Goss boys circled the house. They pranced around twice, with Annie screaming, "Look out for my clothes, look out for my clothes!" and how they missed tearing down that clothes-line I don't know. Back in front for a third time, they drew their guns and fired into the air until the chambers were empty.

They struggled to calm the horses, and glanced at us with pure devilment in their faces.

"For Lord's sake—what?" I asked.

Violet cried airily: "Nothing—just good spirits. Come on, Cot, let's put them up," and they rode to the corral.

The sun was sliding into brassy clouds low in the sky. A growing wind seemed laden with dust and weed-chaff as it boomed from the west.

Muddy asked me to bring the phonograph into the house—she was afraid that she might drop it. I was arranging it on top of the black walnut chest when the boys returned.

"Put on *Dixie* again, Rich," Muddy requested.

"No you don't, old lady," said Vi. "That blame thing makes too much noise when it plays *Dixie*. Suppose you put some coffee on the stove instead. We're all going to set and have a talk."

When I raised my face from the machine I saw that both boys were looking at me.

"A talk?" I asked.

"Yes—kind of a confab."

Annie rolled her sleeves primly, and watched us with very bright eyes. "Are ladies admitted?" she asked flippantly.

Violet twisted his shoulders. "Well, Cot, what do you say?"

"Ladies might as well be admitted," said Cotton, "sooner or later." He added, after a moment, looking at Annie: "But I don't exactly know what she's going to say to it."

Violet wore a slight paleness under his tan. He jerked at the tail of his mustache; his laugh splintered the room. "Hell, I know what she'll say! She'll be pleased most to death."

Cotton said, "And I reckon we both knew all along what Rich would say."

Muddy had the fire-box open and was placing sticks amid the ashes. She picked up a tin can and splashed a little kerosene carelessly over the wood. There was a puff as the kerosene found a few coals from the dinner fire; Muddy laughed, and the flames twisted around the wood. The top of the stove checked and clanked at the sudden blast of heat.

"All right, Mud," said Cotton. "You got the coffee?"

"In the pot. I saved it from dinner. Won't take more than a few minutes to warm it up."

Violet said, "One thing. Better put old Belle out on the porch, in case anybody comes."

"That's a good idea."

Violet took the big collie to the door, patting her all the way. He pushed her out and closed the door with care to avoid pinching the eager muzzle in the crack.

There was something ominous in these preparations for what the Goss boys called a confab. I had the *Dixie* cylinder in my hands. I felt it crack suddenly; I had not realized that my hand was pressing so hard. Guiltily I slid the record into its felt-lined tube and pushed the cover on.

"Rich," said Cotton, "set down."

I sat in a kitchen chair at the end of the long table. Cotton drew another chair to the farther end, and pushed it back so that he could stretch out his legs. Muddy was at the stove, swishing coffee in the pot to distribute the heat.

Some coffee splashed out of the spout and frizzled on the iron lid.

Annie Lingen edged toward us. Her right hand was clenching and unclenching nervously, as it had done that first day when she held her glove in it.

Violet Goss stood with his back to his mother. His head was tipped forward. He still wore his black hat, and it was drawn low. Through the unspeakable gloom and coldness which suddenly possessed me, I was dumbly conscious of the fact that Vi was grinning at the pattern of the oilcloth.

"Go ahead," he ordered his brother.

"All right," said Cotton. "We're agreed that this is a good time. We want you to know that we were the ones who stopped the S. C. & W. and took that money."

I heard Annie swallowing, but I couldn't lift my eyes to look at her. Like Violet's, my glance was glued to the table surface.

A remote and disinterested voice—it turned out to be my own—spoke up. "That's pretty hard to believe, if you don't mind my saying so. I heard about that robbery, in Pahoka City. There were two white men and an Indian."

The Goss boys studied my face with amusement.

"Right!" one of them said. "Mud, tell them who the Indian was."

Mrs. Goss came up, giggling softly. "I made a right nice squaw. . . ."

"Squaw?" repeated Cotton. "You were a buck, Muddy!"

"Anyway," said Violet, "she was the one who thought of it. We didn't ask her to come along; we were downright stricken by the idea at first. But then we reasoned that there probably wouldn't be any shooting, so we let her come along and wave her shotgun. All she had to do was wear an old pair of Cotton's pants, cut off for her, and have her hair braided with red yarn. All she had to do was stand there and grunt."

Annie Lingen exclaimed, "Train robbers! Well, I'll be *God damned*—" and her tone splintered into the most unlovely merriment in the world.

Violet began to laugh, and his mother was laughing all the time. Cotton joined in; after I had swallowed a few times, I sent my voice rolling along with theirs. . . . Thus I hear our hideous glee through a low-ceiled room, clamoring down the years.

22

THEY HAD PERFORMED THEIR FIRST ROBBERY nearly two years before. To my surprise, it was a hold-up on the Santa Fe near Perry, Oklahoma Territory; I had never connected this robbery with those on the S. C. & W. because of the notable difference in the method employed.

At Perry the Goss boys had traveled (on some farm business of vague importance) so far from home that they felt there was no chance of their being recognized; they didn't bother about masks. A night train stood on a sidetrack; acting on a mutual impulse almost festive in its conception, Cot and Violet blackened their faces with soot and knocked on the door of the baggage car. The express messenger thought it was the agent knocking. He slid the door carelessly, as the men had presumed that he might. They presented their guns, climbed in and closed the door. They got nearly eight hundred dollars without much difficulty; leaving the messenger bound and gagged, they dropped to the ground just as the train started up.

They did not confess their exploit to Muddy until after several months had passed. She offered enthusiastic approval. To her mind the owners of express

and railroad companies were all Yankees, and fair game for any Unreconstructed Rebels. If Cotton and Vi held up the mail car of a train, it was not her government's mail: it was Yankee mail, and should be dealt with appropriately by the offspring of any guerrilla.

The poverty which the Gosses had suffered in the past seemed to them excuse enough for such outlawry. They aspired to the Robin Hood tradition, as many bandits have. But if they practiced giving to the poor, I never heard any mention of their charities.

They cherished a belief that the whole thing was rather a joke on vague corporations up North and back East who held financial control of the Santa Fe and the South Central & Western.

Said Violet, "We never have bothered the mail, though Mud urged us to. At first we thought it would be unfortunate to get the government policemen after us——"

Through the buzzing in my ears, I heard my voice saying, "You don't have to actually rob the mail. It's all the same if you interfere with a train on which United States mail is carried."

"Certain—we found that out. But it just seemed like it wasn't fair to a lot of folks—ordinary people, farmers and such, like us—who had written letters. Love letters, maybe, and important family business . . . if we took all that mail and tore it up, looking for money, we wouldn't have felt right. So we never did carry off no pouches. Just express and railroad money—that's all we've ever stole."

Annie watched with feverish eyes. There was a shock evident in Annie's face, but it was only the

shock of amazement and never that of horror. Anything that Cotton and Vi did was all right with her; you could see that. If they had proposed to kidnap Teddy Roosevelt and hold him for ransom, doubtless she would have endorsed the idea wholeheartedly.

We men were her loved ones, her idols; we could be guilty of no wrong unless she saw us performing open outrage upon each other . . . and then, if the wickedness were explained to her satisfaction, she would forgive and forget. She had done just that, after she believed I had stolen something.

"Never made any more hold-ups until last February," said Cotton.

I realized that he had been talking on and on. . . .

"Tail end of winter found us pretty strapped. We might have done another such job before that, only times were good and we didn't need the money bad enough, and couldn't figure out a good way to stop a train close to home. But in February there came a lot of thaws and wash-outs south of Pahoka; trains were running slow."

He said, "One night Vi and I put some handkerchiefs over our faces, and waved a lantern at the northbound train. We didn't have to do any shooting; we got some of the railroad's money—not much over two hundred—and that was about all. They had an express box aboard, but the fellow refused to yield us the key, and we couldn't bear to kill him. Next time we used dynamite."

Next time was in the summer just past, and that was when Muddy went along. They laid their plans more carefully than ever before. Cotton journeyed west

of Tulsa and worked with the railroad construction crew for three days, until he discovered just how often the pay roll money came south, and on what train. Then he pretended to get drunk, and had himself fired off the job.

Both Gosses had used dynamite in their well-digging and other farm work, and they possessed a fair understanding of explosive charges. The railroad had never discovered just how the bandits got hold of the colored flares and torpedoes which stopped the pay roll train, but now I learned first-hand. The Goss boys entered an unlocked tool house at Pahoka City; either the agent, Jeffson, had never missed the stuff they took; or else he feared to report it, dreading the consequence of his negligence.

On the night of the robbery the family traveled across the prairie and halted near Eagle Hill. The subsequent chapter of their outlawry was recited with enthusiasm and complicated detail: it involved a buckboard, dynamite, the stolen flares, and saddle-horses hastening over the lonely landscape. . . . Their only error was in the charge of explosives employed. They used too much dynamite, and wasted a lot of currency as a result—they didn't know how much, until they read the newspapers.

I said, "I suppose some of the bills were only partly damaged."

Violet laughed. "Some of them got scorched a mite—powder bit, you might say. I guess we lost at least a thousand dollars. We haven't tried to pass any money that looked too suspicious."

I heard Annie demanding eagerly of Mrs. Goss, "Weren't you frightened most to death?"

Muddy squeezed her eyes shut, and shivered with the remembered thrill. "I was all jumpy! But it was fun being an Indian, and the boys said I made a real good one."

Then the wind wasn't saying a word; the sunset wasn't whispering on the window panes—no one was saying anything, except the cheap old clock on the shelf.

Violet Goss shuffled his feet. He asked, "Well, Rich?"

"You just told me a story," I said. "You didn't ask any questions for me to answer."

Violet said, "Reckon you know what we mean. What we were meaning all the time. . . ."

Muddy poured coffee for us, and Cotton placed my cup and saucer handy. "Don't you worry about Rich," he addressed the others. "He's been places; he's done things. The way he handled Charley Tatum this morning was sure enough proof."

I said warily, "Yes, I've been places and done things."

"Ever shoot a man?" asked Violet.

"Yes," I answered.

"More than one?"

"Yes."

"Are you having some real trouble with the Law?"

If I wasn't having trouble with the law right then and there, I don't know what I was having. "Plenty of trouble!"

Cotton said, "I could have took my oath on that."

I slid my hand to the back of my head—my scalp was clammy.

Cot drank some coffee; he burnt his tongue, and

sputtered and exclaimed. "You see how it is, Vi!" He wiped his mouth. "You, too, Muddy. All of you can see. It's a natural situation: Rich is already at outs with the Law. He came to Pahoka with practically no cash in his jeans; I reckon God Almighty sent Vi and me into Cookson's Bar that same day."

Annie Lingen shook her head. "Cotton, you oughtn't to mention God."

"Well, I figure He did send us."

Annie said primly, but with voice faltering: "Maybe God doesn't approve of your stopping trains."

Before Cotton could answer, Vi had taken hold of Annie's shoulders and turned her around so swiftly that he appeared to offer her violence. I half rose, upsetting my chair.

"Do you approve, Annie?" demanded Vi. "Answer me that."

She said in a tone that faltered no longer, "You know I do. I approve of anything you boys do; I love you all. I've said that before. I mean it."

"Drink up your coffee, Rich," commanded Muddy.

I let the burning liquid touch my dry lips; then I pushed the coffee cup away.

Dusk stood around us in that room, now that the last tint of sunset was fading from the windows. I could see flame inside the stove—could count the cracks—the ruddy circles around the lids.

"You're taking a long time to decide," said Violet.

I cleared my throat. "The fact is, I'm not sure whether I believe you or not."

They regarded me incredulously. . . . The boys

were tittering, seeming to share a trivial joke. "I guess you don't mean we're liars?" Cotton chuckled.

"Just put yourself in my place—either one of you. You'd be surprised, wouldn't you? Jackstraws, tiddly-winks; phonographs and lamps for your mother . . . it just doesn't match up with stopping trains, that's all."

The Goss brothers laughed. Annie was between them, looking at me with confidence; but still arrayed with the Gosses as if they all might choose to be enemies of mine.

"Those things don't ordinarily go with doing what we did," said Cotton. "You're dead right about that. But you'll have to believe that we did come Keno on the S. C. & W., after you take a look at the money we got."

My lips were glued together. I forced them apart. "I'll believe it when I see the money, yes."

Violet banged his thigh against the table as he came forward. "Then you're not taking our word for it?"

"Oh, hush up!" cried his brother impatiently. "I see how Rich is feeling! He can't take it in. He thought we were a couple of farm boys who dug wells! He hasn't handled any money for so long he's forgot what the stuff looks like. Well, we'll show him what we got stowed away on the prairie, and he can make his own free choice."

Muddy's match went yellow against the lamp wick . . . under the eternal bower of pale colors on the ceiling, Violet was still watching me with suspicion. "Is that what you mean, Rich? You mean—if you see the money with your own eyes, you'll guarantee to stick with us?"

I chose my words. "When you show me the money, and I see with my own eyes that you have the cash, I'll do one thing or the other: I'll either walk out and keep my mouth shut—and go where you won't be bothered by me— Or else——"

Cotton said softly, "Yes?"

"Or else I'll face the Law alongside you." With every word I was hammering a nail into a coffin . . . whose coffin I didn't know.

The Goss boys said they couldn't take me to the money, now that darkness had come, but they would do so first thing in the morning.

Muddy and Annie started to get some supper while we men sat around the table. I hammered at myself to be as talkative as I might have been ordinarily, yet I had to keep hauling the reluctant words from my throat. Finally Violet got out some glasses. The rye in the jug was gone but he opened a bottle of Murray Hill Club, and I think we all felt better after a drink or two.

Cotton's round eyes shone as he recited his plans. He was in dead earnest about the Pan-American Exposition. This business of Muddy going along to actually help the boys hold up a train was a stunt successful enough on a single occasion . . . I suppose the boys had yielded to her entreaties partly because they knew that in her tomboy heart she wanted to go, and partly because they needed three people and three guns—if not more—on a job like that.

But it wouldn't do in the future, Cotton said plainly. He thought that he and Violet and I could drift up across the line into Kansas, or perhaps go over on the Rock Island east of Pahoka; no one had held up the

Rock Island thereabouts in years. He wanted us to pick our opportunity carefully and make a better haul than they had ever made before.

The boys said they had nearly three thousand dollars left from the pay roll and express robbery after counting out the currency destroyed and the money they had already spent. That was enough to carry us all nicely through the year, but it wouldn't leave much margin for comfortable excursions to Buffalo, New York.

In his warped and stubborn imagination, Cotton Goss would admit no other course but a trip to Buffalo for all of us. Muddy and Annie wanted to see the Exposition; that was enough for Cotton: they would see the Exposition, if he had anything to do with it.

None of us ate much supper. I said that I was tired and thought I would go to bed. Annie and Muddy both kissed me good night, and I wanted to cry when they did it; but I hadn't cried since I was thirteen, and couldn't begin now.

My gun I left hanging on my chair—a pledge of faith, as offered the first night. I saw Violet look at the dangling holster before he followed me out on the porch.

"Rich, I was kind of excited a while back. You won't hold that against me, no matter what you choose to do?"

After I had shaken hands with him he seemed satisfied. . . . I was halfway to the barn, lantern in hand, when I heard light steps running after me. Annie was coming. I turned around and put the lantern on the ground.

"Rich," sobbed Annie in my arms, "you're going to stay with us, aren't you?"

I stroked her shoulders. "You seem to fall in mighty easy with the notion of being a bandit."

"I'm not going to be a bandit—you are! Gee, I guess maybe you're already one. . . . Oh, Rich, something's been worrying me: I been thinking about those little cloths—those little pieces of cloth you've got. I still don't know what they are. I guess you ought to tell the boys about finding them in the drawer."

Her face wore a false ruddiness in the lantern light. I pushed her shoulders back so that I could look into her eyes. "You didn't say anything, did you? You promised me you wouldn't."

Annie kissed me. "Not a single word. But oughtn't——?"

"I'll tell them tomorrow," I said.

"Promise?"

"If you'll not say anything ahead of me. . . . I've got good reason for waiting. You'll just have to trust me." My voice was husky with my own misery.

"I'll trust you, Rich darling," Annie said. She was shivering—perhaps because of the cool night, perhaps for some other reason.

My hands slid from her shoulders. I wanted to curse aloud the world we were in, the Forces which shaped it; but she had whispered her good-by and was running back to the house.

I went to the barn and crawled into the loft, and lay there through the worst torment of my life.

UNTAMED, I THOUGHT . . . IT WASN'T A MATTER of good people and bad people. You couldn't make out a case for good people like the Tatum's merely because they didn't rob trains, or against bad people like the Gosses merely because they did. You couldn't say that the Gosses were noble because their souls were contrived of impishness and tenderness; or that the surly Tatum's were criminals because they crushed through life with abuse for all who got in their way.

It was merely a story of wild coyotes which had never been trapped—of Oklahoma chicken-hawks that liked to fly according to their own whimsy. When fences were knit closer over the prairie, people of Cotton's and Vi's breeding would be strangled by the wire. . . .

They were untamed; I loved them; the mass of humanity might never do so. Since they gracefully concluded that laws were not for them, there was nothing left but that organized society must despise and punish them.

I got out of the mow and walked the barnyard, because I could lie still no longer. The wind came up

colder, and I shivered in my semi-nakedness; I hoped half-heartedly that I might catch pneumonia before dawn. If I lay in delirium when the sun came up, not even my thorny conscience might blame me when I refused to ride with Cotton and Vi.

Through darkness I felt my way to the empty corral. I folded arms on the top rail, and put my head there. When the collie came to touch my bare knee with her chilly nose, I could not at first lean down to pet her. At last I tore a hand away and put it in the thick warm hair, next to her skin. There my hand rested, closing convulsively amid the matted softness of the dog's coat—opening again to feel the living hide. Never did she moan at the pain which my handling may have given her. She only stiffened and sighed.

I wanted to wail my woes to the dog, to ask for sufferance and understanding; I could not make a sound.

At last I went to the barn, chilled to the bone, and wound myself in blankets. I could not rest and relax, even when I grew warm. Below a black horizon the sun would soon be inching up, and it would bring the culmination of all bitterness when once it hung, shrouded or not, above the tawny plain.

Annie would hate me forever; the gamin quality was certain to overwhelm her womanliness, and she would spit upon my memory. I would live as a curse in the recollection of those tall friends with whom, in so short a space, I had formed a brotherhood.

There was the alternative—the renegade alternative—but nothing in my past or in my natural inclination might impel me to accept it. Too many sour-faced

old Englishmen and Welshmen brayed from unknown graves . . . this was a job, and I would do it.

I flayed my mind. When sleep came at last, I was wise with that exhausted wisdom that befalls the maddest men. . . . Annie was the agent of our undoing, the master-contriver of this cruelty in which I would soon indulge. Her warmth, her electricity had held me on that farm, had melted me into the substance of these wild and crooked lives as no other power might.

Annie Lingen, loving Cotton and Violet and me and forcing us together in the process, had made pulp of our lives. But it would never be her fault, because she was born to love loosely and heedlessly; and we were born to pulse in her joy, to suffer with her.

24

SOMEWHERE THERE MUST BE FILES AND ENVELOPES, faded and shabby from much handling, which contain the typed record of things which happened on that next day. I don't know who owns what used to be the S. C. & W., or whether the modern owners of those ragged rails and ties consider the chronicle of ancient malefactions as worth saving.

But the files kept by peace officers are something else; old brick buildings yawn to receive them. So—somewhere in a dark cupboard or vault of such a moldy building—there rests the affidavit which I uttered after I was taken to jail.

It concerns the Goss brothers chiefly, and their enemies; weather comes into the picture only incidentally. I think now that there ought to be more about the weather . . . I shall tell how the sun slid up remote and colorless under its vest of clouds; and I shall mention rain which began to drift in a spray before two hours of daylight had touched that prairie.

As soon as it was light enough to see, I climbed down from the straw-mow and hunted for a grain sack; I had plans for the use of one. I found an empty

sack, and tied it flat around my chest inside my torn shirt. I couldn't have looked much thicker to the casual observer. I was sure that the boys wouldn't notice the difference in my chest size and as it turned out, they didn't.

While performing this preparation, I was careful to keep away from the day-lit space immediately in front of the door. Someone might be watching from the house . . . I was correct in this assumption, though late with it. When—many hours afterward—we took our long and dreadful road to Pahoka City, the boys told me that Violet had suffered from suspicion during the night.

Cotton was the most eager to have me join in their banditry; and he had to talk earnestly to persuade Violet about the wisdom of such a course. After I went to bed in the barn, Violet tossed around and couldn't sleep; Cotton counseled him reassuringly, but that didn't do any good.

Finally Violet went out and sat on the porch for an hour or two, watching the barn. He had no notion that I was a detective, but he feared that I might try to sneak away on one of the horses (no matter if I had left my gun in the house) and return later with a posse in order to claim the reward offered for capturing the hold-up men. . . . Violet Goss wasn't the world's best sentinel. Apparently he never even guessed that I was wandering outside by the corral.

That morning the boys didn't come from the house until I was half through with milking. They took care of their horses; we talked while we worked, but mainly about what we had read of the Exposition in

Buffalo; we didn't mention the problem and decision at hand.

Muddy and Annie had breakfast ready for us by the time we got to the house. There were pancakes and bacon. Annie was heating two heavy flatirons on the back of the stove; she planned to start with her ironing the moment we finished our breakfast. She had washed out some things of Muddy's too; and already an ironing-board was set up between a wash-stand and stool.

I tried to get the pancakes down, but it was hopeless. I did a little better with the bacon, and drank a cup and a half of coffee.

We men said good-by, and took our hats. I stopped to buckle on my gun belt.

"Expecting more snakes today?" asked Violet.

I contrived a smile. "Suppose I ought to wear it all the time, after what happened yesterday in Pahoka. You had me addled last night—I don't know how I came to leave my gun here in the house."

It's odd, but I can remember exactly what the women were wearing. Muddy had the same calico dress she wore the first night I saw her; and a sort of white yarn jacket, home-knit but frayed, was tight around her shoulders. Annie wore a gray skirt and shirt waist. She had the tucked satin belt which I always liked. Her clothes weren't made for farm life; they reminded me of city streets and city ways—even in their shabbiness, or perhaps because of it.

There was a taffeta dust-ruffle on her underskirt, and I remember how she swished every time she went over to examine her flatirons. Just as we left, Annie

was rubbing an iron with beeswax bound in a rag; the pungent smell of burning wax filled the room.

Cotton and Vi and I buttoned up our coats; the wind was raw. It wasn't any day for bareback riding. Tony's coat would be slippery when the rain came, so Violet put a saddle on his pony. It was a saddle Annie had used two days before and he had to lengthen the stirrups. Cotton rode Quanah; and I took the horse called Chief.

As we climbed the hill beyond Evening Creek, clouds were driving from the southwest, low and broken and dark. Mist came from them, blowing freely in our faces. But still there wasn't enough rain to lay the dust, and for a time the dust came up like smoke whenever we struck a spot of raw ground.

We didn't talk as we rode. . . . When Violet singled out ahead, I heard him chanting the words of the darky song from the phonograph record.

*. . . as they threw him out the door,
And whistled up the same familiar tune.*

It turned out we had only two miles to go. We rode due west and then a little north, off the Goss land and onto property owned by Mr. Prescott. The boys said that Prescott used to run a big herd over that country but he wasn't pasturing any cattle nowadays. . . . The dust vanished, as spray thickened into rain; we turned up our coat collars and drew down the brims of our hats.

Cotton and Vi had buried their money in a buffalo wallow on a ridge. From the edge of the wallow you could look in any direction and have a perfect view

of the land for at least a mile's radius. At first I thought it odd that they had not concealed the money closer to home for safety and convenience' sake, but it appeared that safety was better served by this location: people could have lain spying at a dozen points near the house or barn without the boys being any the wiser. Here in this lonely depression (dug out long since by the scratching of vanished bison) only birds might watch when Cotton and Vi visited their treasure chest.

Their storehouse was an old nail-keg lined with burlap and planted not far beneath the surface of the soil. Tumbleweeds had blown into the shallow pit and other weeds grew round the place, rooted fast.

When we stopped at the margin and the boys said, "This is it," they challenged me to point out the spot where the money was buried.

I couldn't do it and said so.

"It's a good spot," said Cotton. "Vi picked it. One of us can set here on the edge while the other fellow digs, and see if any stranger offers to come nigh."

Violet said, "Brother Cotton, let's wait no longer!"

They hadn't brought a shovel with them, and I wondered how they were going to dig.

"We hid a spade, at first," Cotton informed me, "but it used to worry us. We figured a neighbor might come across it; and still we didn't like to be witnessed toting a spade from home every time. We got something else."

Our horses huddled with their tails toward the wind. Cot started to walk north from the edge of the wallow; Violet and I stood watching him. Vi bit a piece of tobacco from his plug and pushed it inside

his mouth with satisfaction . . . Cotton walked nearly a hundred yards.

Then he picked up something out of the weeds, and brought it back: an old garden hoe with a broken handle, sandy with rust.

"Just the kind of old relic," explained Cotton, "that somebody might fling out of his wagon when driving past. No folks would be suspicious. They might be if they saw a good shovel."

He slid down the slope and walked part way across the wallow. He studied the ground, and began to hack thin soil among the tumbleweeds. Just as he struck wood with his hoe, I stepped around on the other side of the horses.

I wanted to get out my grain sack before things had gone any further, though I pretended to be busy on another errand. I flipped open my shirt, loosened the sack and drew it out. I dropped the sack and came back.

By this time Violet had gone into the hollow. Under its coating of dirt and rain, his thin face shone with animation. The keg was uncovered and the wooden lid removed.

Cotton lifted out a tobacco canister of the same sort he used for target-shooting on the previous Sunday.

Violet beamed when he saw the can. "Reckon I better get back," he said reluctantly. "One of us ought to stay on top whilst this is going on," and he ran up the slope.

Cotton said, "Come here, Rich. Bend close."

I didn't know whether or not Violet had returned to his sentry-post so that he could cover me with his

gun if necessary; anyway, it didn't matter at the moment. I squatted beside the big yellow can, and Cotton bent back the tin lid.

The currency was there, all right, bundles of it.

"Look at this one." Cotton dug among the packages of greenbacks. "Looky here," and he drew out a thick sheaf. "This is tens—all of them. This is the one I like, but we haven't never yet taken any of them. Five hundred dollars there are in this one little packet—fifty ten-dollar bills! Just imagine that. The other packages are mainly fives and ones and twos."

Violet hovered beyond. Water dripped from his hat brim but the rain had slackened. "You low on cash, Cotton?" Vi called to his brother. "You want to take any?"

Cotton reflected. "Reckon maybe a hundred dollars. I spent forty-five dollars cash money for that phonograph yesterday, and I'm getting short."

"Me," said Vi, "I've still got plenty. I don't need none."

Cotton picked out a package of fifty one-dollar bills wrapped with a rotten rubber band. He counted them slowly and I watched his lips moving as he counted. Then he gathered up some fives—a few were loose and crumpled, and of these several had been marked by the explosion.

I watched closely to see whether he took any of the damaged notes, but he didn't. The five-dollar bill which Violet passed to Ole Flugstad must have been an unusual oversight—perhaps the Goss boys' first oversight of that nature.

Cotton made a big roll of the bills and jammed the wad into his trousers pocket. Looking at his brother,

he nodded his head in my direction. "What about him, Vi?"

"Cot," said Violet, "that's a right wise question! I never did think of that."

"You need some money, Rich?"

I shook my head; I could feel my wet face growing numb.

"Oh, go ahead," the Goss boys told me. "Help yourself, Rich. We know you ain't got more than a dollar or so."

I said, "If I'd helped to earn that money, I'd probably take my share. I just don't want any money I haven't earned. I'm funny that way."

Violet protested generously. In his eager attempt at persuasion he was making up, or trying to, for his suspicion which had prevailed longer than Cotton's.

But Cotton closed the lid of the can and slid the tin back into its cubby-hole. "I'm aware how Rich feels. I'd likely be the same way, and you too, Violet . . . if I hadn't helped earn it. . . ."

His quaint conceit struck me sharply; startled laughter rose in my throat.

Cotton straightened and looked at me with assurance.

"Of course we know what you're going to decide," he said. "Nobody wants you to leave." He hesitated, then added, "Annie least of all."

"Hell, yes," said Violet. "He'll stay! Man can't look at a nice lot of shinplasters like that, and not want to harvest himself a few."

The wind bit our faces; for a few moments it felt almost as if the wind were dry.

Cotton was giving me the beauty of his smile. "I

reckon you'll take full note of the possibilities. The three of us—the way we can manage, no officers in the world might hope to stop us. Some people would suspect us in the end; but they'd have to catch their rabbits first, and prove it, and they never could. We're agreed, Vi and me, that you're a man who could be trusted complete. Anything you guarantee to do, Rich, you do it."

He was forecasting doom, but I couldn't turn away. The breeze had hunted tags of hair from under Violet's hat brim and was lashing them damply; the wind ruffled all our clothes; the sky was dirty above us.

A pageant of happy illusion drifted before me . . . we three ranged far and wide. We stopped a mail train at Portersville. We stepped briskly into the bank at Abilene, and walked out loaded with greenbacks. Muddy was fat and shining in the background, prouder and happier each minute. Annie Lingen wrapped her tissue around our lives, no matter how far from Oklahoma we preyed. . . .

It was a matter of simple decades, a matter of the age in which we lived. Thirty or forty years before (say that we had lived then!) there might have been a different story to tell. But this was the first year of the twentieth century; the Goss boys were indeed born out of their time.

My answer was cut and dried for me. Nevertheless I couldn't offer it. "Well," I said casually, "I can't blame you."

Violet came down into the wallow, his boot-heels denting the earth. Cotton was kneeling beside the tobacco can again.

"Can't blame us for what?"

"Most men would want to throw in with you," I said, "if they got the chance. On the other hand, I don't blame you for offering the chance to me. I'm your kind of man. If it comes to shooting, I've demonstrated that I can shoot rings around either one of you."

Cot rubbed some damp earth from his hands and looked a little annoyed.

"I don't guess that's a polite way of joining in with us," he said gravely. "I'll say, Rich, that I was strengthened in my belief, when I saw how you handled Charley Tatum. I had to sell my notion to Brother Vi, but I sure sold him. Just the same, I take that remark about shooting as unkind."

"He meant aimed fire, Cot," offered Violet.

"No, I didn't." There was no smile in my voice or in my face. "I meant hip shooting."

"You don't fire from the hip, like Cot there."

I nodded at Violet Goss. "Did you ever ask me to?"

Cotton pulled down his smooth upper lip and scratched it reflectively with his lower teeth. "Can't say that we ever asked you to."

"Do you want to ask me now?"

The Goss boys turned for that familiar consultation and interchange of glances. Violet shrugged. "If he's practiced shooting that way at all," he said, "reckon he can beat me."

"Rich," exclaimed Cotton. "I've fired my gun no way but that, since 1893!"

I turned abruptly and climbed to where the horses were standing; I could feel the puzzled glare of the Goss boys boring my back. I found the grain sack and came down again, whirling the sack in my hand.

"Where did you get that?" demanded Cotton.

"Saw it laying up there."

"No, you didn't."

I couldn't get away with that. I said, "If you have to have the truth: I fetched this bag inside my shirt, because I thought I'd want it for a target. I didn't carry it outside, in sight, because I was afraid you boys might think I was planning to carry your money off in it."

They laughed when I said that.

I took the crumpled bag over to the end of the buffalo wallow. It hung damp and heavy against the weeds and earth where I spread it; and from where the brothers stood it presented a very fair target.

When I came back to the boys I said, "In any sort of enterprise there's disagreements bound to come up. There's got to be one boss; you know that as well as I do. To my mind the ideal boss is the man who's best with his gun. Isn't that fair?"

Cotton said, "Yes. But you don't mean you think you can—" He left the words unsaid; he was overcome with amazement at my cockiness.

"In aimed fire," I said, "I can outshoot Violet, as I've done—and most assuredly I can outshoot you, Cot. I'll show you now that I can outshoot both of you from the hip, not sighting. Five rounds. Fast as you can pull the trigger."

Cotton swept off his hat and threw it on the ground. "By God," he screamed, "I'll take you, Mister Rich, for a hundred dollars. For a thousand dollars!"

"What makes you think I've got so much money?" I laughed.

Cotton grinned, but his eyes were extremely bright

and his lips colorless. Not until then had I realized the inordinate pride he took in his strange accomplishment.

He stepped around beside me and dropped his left hand to his gun butt, waving his right hand meanwhile. "Shoot ahead, Mister Rich."

I told him, "I don't aim to have you outshoot me. I said I'd do it to you."

"Vi," asked Cotton, "is it worth while your trying?"

Violet shook his head, but pushed his brows together just the same. He drew his .38 and planted the gun tightly against his right hip bone. He swore softly, measuring the distance to the grain sack and observing the tilt of his gun barrel.

He fired once; the dirt flew, two feet above the sack. He lowered the muzzle slightly and fired the other shots as fast as he could, double-action. Somewhere along the line he got one hole in the sack, and this was better than I expected him to do.

We all went over and looked at the target. Violet spat upon the hole his bullet had made and rubbed the spot with dirt.

At our station again, Cotton Goss pushed his left boot firmly into the soil. When his holster turned forward, I began to work back a few paces. I counted the shots, rapidly though they came. None of us ever loaded six chambers of his revolver; even if Cotton's gun was emptied in a few seconds it seemed like half an hour to me.

I kept watching the sack: it danced on the weeds—one corner flew up. It seemed to be punched again and again.

Cotton twisted his head to look at me with all the pride in the world; Violet looked with him. Then they saw what had happened, as I stood covering them with my Colt, though neither could fully comprehend at first.

I said, "Don't come this way, boys."

25

THEIR EYES: THE TRAPPED COYOTES, THE GOPHERS and wild prairie doves laughing no longer—put into a single cage as they looked at my gun. . . .

“I had to get your revolvers emptied. That seemed like a good way.”

Violet squatted on his thin hips; I thought he was crouching for a spring.

“I don’t want to shoot unless I have to,” and I kept my gun on them.

Their faces were sick under the raindrops, under the dabs of clay. . . . I told the men to keep their hands up. Vi had put his revolver back into the holster without loading it; he was always doing that when we practiced target shooting, and I knew what to expect from him.

So I told Cotton, “You keep both hands up. Now, Violet, you reach with your left hand—your *left*—and pitch your gun over here. I know you’re hell on wheels with your right hand; I don’t want you to throw that gun in my face.”

Fresh sweat covered his forehead, but he obeyed me. He mentioned later that he would have tried to

strike me with his weapon, quickly thrown, but all the time he was afraid that my own revolver was aimed more at Cotton than at him. He said he never could have stood it if Cotton had been shot through fault of his own.

"Now, Cot," I ordered, "reach over with your right hand and let me have yours, same way."

Silently he tossed his .44. It fell near his brother's gun.

"Back up, both of you. Four or five steps. Go slow."

When they had done so, I picked up each of the guns in turn and stuffed them inside my belt—on the left, where they wouldn't be in the way.

Cotton spoke hoarsely: "Go ahead, Rich. You got our guns. We were a couple of plain fools; I never met any plainer. Take the money and get out."

I said, "I want the money. That's the reason I brought along that grain sack, instead of maybe using one of our hats for a target. But I want you boys too."

They looked at me with incredulity. "Want us?" cried Violet.

I told them why I was there; why I wanted them.

Violet showed his teeth and called me a name, screaming with eyes shut when he did it.

Cotton merely made a wry face. "You never did act like a detective—not from the first moment. . . . Let me tell you this: I'll never trust man alive again. Not on this earth. I reckon we were the plain fools that you see us, playing right into your hands. . . . I would have took my vow on you——"

His voice broke apart as he said this, and in my agony I couldn't look at his face any longer. I stared above his head, watching his rigid hands instead.

I said, "I gave a fake name. My name isn't Rich Williams—it's Lloyd Richland."

They were both silent for a time. Then Violet asked, "You the fellow they call Shorty Richland?"

"Yes."

"Reckon we've heard about you. You been in the papers. You took in that Burrows gang at Joplin last year. We heard about that clear down here."

Cotton began to laugh aloud.

"My God," I said, "cut that out."

"I'm laughing, Rich, because I won't never trust man alive again. . . . Oh, I know you won't have us killed! The judge, he can't hang us for what we did. But in jail or out, I'll never trust another man. Why, Rich, we loved you—all of us. We felt as if you was a brother. We thought you felt that way about us."

I cried, "You ought to know how I feel!"

Violet said, "We know how you feel. How does a snake feel in its hole? You ought to feel like that—a snake, after it's had a good hearty meal. How does a fish-worm feel in a manure pile? You ought to know."

"Shut up, Vi," said Cotton drearily.

The rain was coming down again, thin and frosty, as when first we rode away from the house. "I can trust you for one thing, Cotton," I said, "but I'm not so sure about Vi—he's mighty reckless. I'll trust you for this, Cot: you put yourself in my place. It'll be hard, but you try."

My left hand was trembling. I could see it and feel it; I don't know how I kept my gun hand firm.

"You put yourself in my place. You're an officer—you've been an officer for years. You work—you try to keep on the square—you do your job. It's your

job and you've taken an oath, too. You keep doing that job, and doing it."

I said, "It's all arranged . . . the conductor knows about it, and so does the brakeman. He pulls you off the blind baggage, and you land in town—just like any bum. You go into Cookson's Bar, and then it happens. You hate Charley Tatum on sight. And that other fellow—you don't know him, you don't have an idea who he is—but you don't want to see his head caved in——"

Violet sneered, "Sure enough! You'd rather see him chained up in jail the rest of his days!"

"You put your foot out and trip Charley Tatum, and then it all happens," I cried. "It goes along like a train on a track and you don't have anything to do with it—it just keeps going. You wish somebody would burn a flare and stop the train, the way you boys stopped the S. C. & W. But nobody does stop the train. It keeps traveling."

I said, "There's evidence, but you don't want to believe it. You happen to find the little pieces of cloth they cut out to make masks—" and I contrived to get my left hand into my shirt pocket, and bring out those hideous scraps to show them.

"But still you think there must be some mistake. . . . Old man Barrow comes around. He thinks the Goss boys are bandits, because he's got hold of a five-dollar bill from the explosion when they blew the money box. You see the bill, and you tell him to keep his mouth shut. You think the whole business can't be true . . . and then the Goss boys come up and tell you, tell you to your face. And it's your job; it's what you took your oath to do."

There was venom in Violet's eyes, but I thought I could see the frenzy going out of Cotton's face.

"Cot," I said, "my life's in your hands. You think of what I've been saying; you put yourself in my place. If you don't agree that you'd do exactly what I've done, you can walk over here. I'll give you this gun, butt end first. You can either keep it on me until you ride away—or you can blow my brains out. If you still hate me enough."

I stood there, wanting to lick my lips because they were dry in spite of the rain.

Violet half lowered his hands and then lifted them again. "Cot," he sighed, "he actually means it! I swear he does. . . . Go on. Walk over there—what the hell you waiting for?"

Cotton dropped his hands. He took a step forward. I couldn't move; just stood and watched him coming.

All he did was to pick up his hat and try to smash the mud off by swiping the hat against his thigh.

"The hell," he told his brother. "I reckon he's got us, Violet." He whispered, not looking at me: "Like he said—his job. What the Creator put him on earth to do. . . ."

I said thickly, "So you see it that way. . . . Put down your hands, Vi. Don't try to jump me." I edged out of the wallow, where I could look at them with my back to the rain.

"Take the grain sack and empty that tobacco can into it. You might as well keep what money you've got in your pockets; that'll be accounted for, after you're locked up."

"Where you going to lock us up?" cried Violet. "In Pahoka? Sperry Cantwell hates our guts."

I said, "I haven't decided what to do about that; things have been moving too fast."

Cotton peered up through the driving wetness. "You going to arrest Muddy too?"

I shook my head.

"You mean you won't arrest her?"

"I mean I don't know what to do about it! What would you do?"

He thought for a time. "She was in on it . . . you know how Mud is—like a little old child, kind of. She really got fun out of it. But she'd never be happy here on the place, with nobody to take care of her, and us boys off in the penitentiary."

"Go ahead," I said, "finish with the money."

Cotton shook the can upside down to show that it was empty. I told him to bring the sack, and ordered both men out of the wallow. I climbed into my wet saddle and took the reins of the other two horses in my left hand.

"Sorry," I told the Goss boys, "but you fellows will have to walk. You know these horses too well; one of you might give me the slip while I was chasing the other. You walk side by side, with me riding behind. I'll lead Tony and Quanah, if they'll follow that way. If they get to cutting up, I'll have to turn them loose."

The men walked through drenched grass with the wind working around them. Clouds were still ugly overhead. Before we reached the ridge commanding a view of the Goss farm, I became aware that Belle Starr was barking loudly, continuously.

Vi and Cotton heard her too; they quickened their pace. Mounted as I was, I could see the house before they could.

A group of people on horseback moved in front of the porch. I could even see Belle circling on the outskirts of the group; her barking continued . . . rain and mist swept between. I pressed Chief closer on the heels of Cot and Violet as our course took us into a saucer of the ridge.

I couldn't see the house any more, but was startled to hear a pistol shot, followed almost immediately by the roar of a shotgun.

In that moment my mind was as empty as a clean teacup: I could neither guess nor reckon. The Goss boys started to run—Cot still carrying the grain sack.

Belle Starr poured out another series of barks; clearly I heard her scream. There was the distant trample of horses. . . . I overtook Violet and Cotton as they ran; Quanah and Tony pounded behind me.

"Here," I yelled, "take your horses—"

Instantly Violet snatched for Tony's rein; he missed—he caught the stirrup on the nigh 'side, and Tony dragged him through wet clay before Violet could slow the colt and haul himself up. Cotton was on Quanah. He went tearing down the little chasm which served as an avenue to the valley.

Evening Creek splashed our legs. We burst up the slope past the barn; Belle was lying near the front gate; she didn't move, so I was sure someone had shot her. That must have been the pistol we heard, or the shotgun . . . we skated across wet ground into the yard. There weren't any riders in sight. They had gone away—they had run off; they were vanished down the lane before we ever crossed the stream.

Muddy sat in her chair on the porch; she sat as if she had been pushed there; her head turned a little

. . . Annie Lingen bent over her. There wasn't a sound from them at first. Annie wasn't screaming; but when we came closer we could hear Muddy's breath, and it sounded like steam.

Cotton dragged Annie away and then we could see blood all over Muddy's arm and right side. The shotgun lay on the floor. There were shiny slices of broken glass scattered around the empty frame of the shaving mirror.

Annie said, "They shot her. They shot her——"

"When?" One of us cried that, though heaven knows we all had heard the shots.

"They were here, but they're gone . . . they shot her. . . ."

Violet screamed, "Who? Who shot her?" Annie said that she wasn't sure—they were all there, men on their horses—she thought it was the sheriff— It must have been that Tatum man—Brew— A man cried, "Jesus Christ, Brew, you shot that woman!"

It must have been Brew. They called him Brew. He shot Muddy. But they were all gone now——

Annie kept pouring out words; she beat the air with her hands as I held her back. The boys tried to help their mother.

26

PERHAPS IT WAS AROUND DAYLIGHT THAT MORNING, when old Mr. Barrow staggered from his squeaky sofa and went across the street to Cookson's Bar.

(This was never related to me in other hours. Certain events of the day were recited by Annie Lingen and by men who talked to me after I was locked up; and from what I know of the Tatums and Cantwell, I can plot the stark chronology, the sequence. I can count fairly the words and the hoof-beats of those who built this tragedy. And I had stood in Lucian Barrow's studio—that dank and hopeless lair where he was bedded . . . I had looked at him, and talked to him, and felt the pallor of his spirit. I knew what happened to him, without being told.)

He went through gloom to Cookson's Bar and he rattled the door, but the bar wasn't open yet. So he had to sit on the steps and wait. Often the early risers of Pahoka City had seen him there, waiting with dry mouth for the luxury he was not able to provide in advance.

At seven-thirty the bartender unlocked the door, and Lucian Barrow shuffled nervously inside to yield

up his few coins. Folks said that he spent sixty-five or seventy cents, and that was all the money he had in his pockets or any place else.

He begged for credit, but the bartender dared not grant him any; so Mr. Barrow went fawning on Charley Tatum with his plea, when Charley came in. Whatever Charley's faults, he was not physically lazy; he lived in a community of early risers and patterned his habits accordingly. It was shortly after eight when Mr. Barrow was refused credit in the most profane and final speech which Tatum could command.

The old photographer mused inside the front window, gazing at the buildings across the street. Then he crept back to where Tatum and his employee were making up a list of liquor orders.

"I've got a bill. . . ."

"Not against me, you old stink-bug!" said Tatum. "God knows how many drinks you owe me that I'll never get paid for."

Mr. Barrow's body quivered inside his ratty clothes. Two drinks, or three, or whatever he had had—those should have fixed him up before this.

But his mental strain was severe in those days; he needed liberal sustenance if he were to continue existing.

"I got a five-dollar bill," he said, "but I don't dare to spend it! I want to leave it in trust with you. Soon as I collect from the Wilkeses for their golden wedding pictures, I plan to redeem that bill."

The curiosity of Charley Tatum was whetted by this peculiar proposition; he wanted to know just why Mr. Barrow couldn't spend the bank note.

"Don't ask me." The old man began to cry. He went stumbling back across the street. I can visualize him: forcing the unwieldy door of his shop and going past the staring eyes of dead outlaws, pulling the greasy curtain aside . . . and going on and on, until he reached his washstand and dragged back the oil-cloth.

He took his five-dollar greenback over to Cookson's. I don't know what his thoughts were, on the way, and no man will ever know. He did not do this thing because he was weak from need of alcohol; it must be believed that he feared and doubted himself from the first hour of his life. These fears and doubts made him drink too much; and they brought about the shooting of Mrs. Goss, just as they had brought about the death of every plan and promise Lucian Barrow ever made for himself.

And my absurd threat was over him—that fabricated tale about obstruction of justice with which I had hoped to seal Mr. Barrow's lips. If it had not been for this alarm aroused in him, Barrow might long since have spent his five-dollar bill with no comment to draw attention to it. But I had yarned fantastically while I thought I was being shrewd. . . .

"This here is my five-dollar bill, Mr. Tatum!" said Barrow. "Now, you must promise not to spend it elsewhere. You got to swear you'll keep it in trust for me."

Charley carried the bank note outside to look at it in the daylight; then he sent the bartender for Sperry Cantwell, while old Mr. Barrow sat at a table and wept in terror of prison. . . . Other men came into the saloon. The bill was passed from hand to hand.

Charley was for shaking Mr. Barrow until he had shaken the truth out of him, but more temperate counsel prevailed.

They gave the old man a small tumbler of whisky; after he had drunk that, he became talkative in an unsteady fashion.

Sheriff Cantwell sat beside him, but at first the photographer wouldn't tell where he got the bill.

"No, that's for the detective to decide. He's a Federal marshal. . . ."

"What detective—what Federal marshal? I bet you don't even know him."

Mr. Barrow squealed, "Yes, I do. I know him. Him and me—we're going to collect! Going to collect five hundred dollars between us. Dead or alive . . . maybe more. . . ."

They poured him another drink. Brewster Tatum joined in the persuasion.

"It's all right to tell the sheriff about it, old fellow," chuckled Brew. "Why, you're mighty ignorant of the law! Any child would know it's all right to tell a sheriff."

Lucian Barrow told.

Charley Tatum ran to his house—a stone's throw distant, on the street behind the saloon—and got a gun.

He and his brother, with Cantwell, agreed that the whole thing was perfectly obvious. I was undoubtedly a bandit, along with the Goss boys. Probably I had stolen, somewhere or other, the marshal's badge which so impressed Lucian Barrow.

"I would have been notified!" Cantwell beat his flabby hand on the bar. "I would have been notified, if they had sent a man here to investigate——"

The fact that his notorious malfeasance in office under dictatorship of the Tatums might have become common knowledge outside the county, did not apparently enter Cantwell's head. But he lived in white fury to think that one who consorted with the Goss brothers—a common hobo, no less—might be passing himself off as a bona fide detective.

Naturally the Tatums were loud in their declaration that they had known the Goss boys robbed the train, all along. Some people in the neighborhood had wondered about Cotton and Vi (at one time or another, in connection with this latest robbery), but the introduction of a supposed Cherokee Indian into the picture seemed to have discouraged them from pursuing investigation. If the Tatums had circulated baseless rumor, no one appears to have paid much attention before the morning of September twenty-first. Both Tatums were unpopular—though certainly feared—when it came to the rank and file of farmers and citizenry.

To make up a posse, they called in a tenant of Charley's, and a civil engineer named Bradley—a brother-in-law of Sperry Cantwell, who had been a sharpshooter during the Spanish-American War. They deputized these two immediately. Both Tatums already held the official status of deputies, as befitted political moguls who had placed the sheriff in office. If any Gosses were to be killed, they wanted to be there to help.

A crowd gathered at Cookson's, and another at the wooden courthouse. . . . Vi and Cotton had never endeared themselves to Pahoka City. They were too shy and reclusive, to begin with; and they had a pain-

ful way of meting out small justices whenever they chose—as witness Cotton's restraint of Mr. Cal Kite on the day when Annie arrived. Quite a few people thought that the Goss boys should be attended to, on general principles.

On the other hand, many folks favored the extinction of the Tatums if someone would only do the job safely and neatly. Nor was Sperry Cantwell's name ever hymned over the countryside.

It looked like shooting, that was all: the Tatums and Cantwell were intending to arrest the Gosses for train robbery, and were swearing to take me into custody for impersonating an officer. There was gossip that I had participated in the robbery myself, disguised as an Indian; it was told that I had shown my Indian wig to Lucian Barrow.

Brewster Tatum wanted them all to ride out to the Goss place in his two-seated buggy, or in a wagon drawn by a fast team; Charley overruled this. If Cotton and Vi and I got half a chance, we would likely take to the prairie on horseback. So horses were sent for; the men pounded down the hill and west into rain and wind, less than an hour after Mr. Barrow made his dramatic revelation.

The old wretch sat quietly for a time, refusing to talk to anyone. Then he picked up his glass of whisky—the glass was still half full—and threw it against the front window, where it made a big splash and a nick in the window-glass. There must have been some spark of pride and decency still left in Lucian Barrow, to provide him with such fury of conscience. He helped himself to a bottle of Live Oak from behind the bar,

and nobody stopped him. Then he limped across to his shop, and slammed the door shut.

Annie told me the rest of the story; there wasn't much to tell—it all happened so quickly. She was ironing, and Muddy was looking at a tattered cookbook, trying to find the recipe for a marble cake that Violet liked. . . .

They had the phonograph going: it was playing *The Whistling Ducky*. They had just put the record on a second time, when Belle set up her barking.

Muddy and Annie went out on the porch, to find five men riding into the yard. Mrs. Goss recognized the Tatums instantly.

She cried, "You get out of this yard."

"We're after your boys," said Sheriff Cantwell, "and that stranger who's staying here."

"What do you want with my boys?"

"That's all right, what we want with your boys!" Cantwell ordered: "Get down, Brad and Sam; take a look in the house. The rest of us will take the barn."

Belle kept barking and barking.

Muddy cried, "My boys aren't to home! You better vamoose before they show up."

The only reply came from Charley Tatum, whose black mare was plunging wildly due to the activity of the dog. He rode toward the collie, lashing with his quirt.

Muddy didn't say a word. She was inside the door like a flash, and Annie marveled that so bulbous a figure could move with such rapidity.

The gramophone record kept on (they had thrown the whistling ducky out of the church door by now, and the shrill and scratchy chorus began to hiss).

Muddy came: she had her shotgun—she was swinging it around. I don't know whether she would have fired or not. The gun was loaded, she was cocking the hammer . . . a revolver banged in the yard. Then a man's voice yapped in surprise, "Jesus Christ, Brew! You shot that woman——"

The gun dropped from Muddy's hands and went off. The charge didn't hit anyone but blew a furrow across the floorboards. Maybe Brew Tatum was shooting in honest self-defense when he pulled the hasty trigger of his revolver; that was what he cried to people in Pahoka City, an hour later—he admitted shooting Mrs. Goss, but it was in self-defense.

The impact of the bullet wasn't stout enough to knock a woman like Muddy off her feet. She staggered back; Annie Lingen tried to catch and hold her, but Muddy's weight forced Annie against the house wall, and that was when the shaving mirror fell down and broke.

Annie saw blood on Muddy's arm. At first she cried, "Oh, honey; they shot you in the arm!" but the bullet had passed through the tight calico sleeve and round flesh. It had entered Muddy's side and drilled deep.

By this time Annie wasn't looking at the men in the yard. She wasn't thinking about pursuit and revenge; she was only thinking about Muddy's wounded arm, and how she must hold her up and not let her fall.

"Let me set," Mrs. Goss was gasping. "Let me—set in the—chair." Somehow the girl supported Muddy for several steps until she could draw the chair against the back of Muddy's legs, and then the thick body sagged into the seat with a force that cracked one of the rockers.

The horses moved nervously in the dooryard. As the riders swam before Annie's gaze, she could not be sure who sat upon which horse, or who wore which hat. . . .

Someone muttered, "Let's get." They rode pell-mell toward the lane. They moved furiously: twenty hoofs spread across a wide area, stamping the ground, so there was no telling just which man rode over Belle Starr and put an end to her barking.

Muddy didn't want to get out of her rocking-chair. That was the one thing she seemed to hold in her mind to the last: it was her favorite seat—she had sat there in wistful hours listening to the Oklahoma wind, saying to herself that the wind was a fiddle-tune . . . the rocker had been brought all the way from the Ouachita Mountains, years before.

The rocker represented her well-loved past; it was only a cheap old chair, but strong and low—just Muddy's size . . . green paint was worn off wherever her hands and arms or heavy body had rubbed. There was a thin cushion—homemade—of plaid gingham stuffed with something or other; and though this cushion was pressed hard and greasy by long use, Mrs. Goss put her head against it lovingly.

Most of the blood came from her arm. With that kind of wounds, people do not advertise their rapid sickness to the watchers. They fill up and die inside; if they are the kind that Muddy was, they don't even whimper about it.

Violet kept crying, "Get her on the bed!" but Cotton shook his head.

While I hung over Muddy the Goss boys had ample opportunity to snatch back their weapons; or they could have taken my loaded gun from its holster, but no one of us thought about that. We got scissors and cut open Muddy's clothes along the side. Annie brought a basin, with water and a cloth, and washed Muddy's side. That was all we did for her: the best doctor on earth couldn't have done more.

I thought about the buggy: it was broken. . . . I thought about the buckboard that stood under a shed next to the barn . . . Pahoka City was a thousand miles away, and what was the use.

Mrs. Goss opened her eyes slightly. She whispered, "Gramophone—put on—cylinder—" Probably she wanted to hear a military band such as she favored; but when Violet started the machine (we stood there and heard him cranking; he seemed to crank that gramophone for an hour) the tune was *The Whistling Ducky*.

The needle stuck on the cylinder part way through; those old machines had a trick of doing that. It stuck on that line where the singer cried, "He began once more," and a fragment of the line reiterated itself like sledge strokes on a nail driven into our mutual brain . . . *gan once, gan once* . . . over and over, with the mechanism running down, and the words growing deeper in tone and slower in tempo, until Cotton went inside and turned the thing off.

Muddy was past listening to it anyway. She crossed over while the record was still playing, I think. She had her eyes squeezed tightly shut, and there was a sly expression on her face proving beyond question that she knew a secret few people would ever know.

After I tried to find the heart-beats and couldn't, I said, "She's gone," or something like that. Violet walked to the end of the porch and leaned against the post; he sat down suddenly, as if the bones were gone out of his long legs. He stretched out on one side, turning his face against his arm. . . .

Annie went into the kitchen and stood by the sink, grasping the water-worn board that rimmed it, and standing with head bent while she cried. . . . Cotton and I carried Muddy to her bedroom. Cot hunted around until he found a clean sheet, and then he spread the good linen cloth over the figure on the bed.

"If we'd been here at home," he said, "I reckon this wouldn't have happened—not the same way." There was no malice in his tone. He didn't seem to be accusing me of anything, though by that time I was accusing myself of every crime contrived by man since he began to sin.

Through the one little window on the south I saw Violet get up and go to the lane gate; he was looking at the dead collie. He stared around hopelessly and then picked up the soiled body of Belle and carried it a little way, and then put the dog down again. Why he did this I never understood, and probably Vi couldn't have told either.

Annie came from the other room and sat on the floor at the foot of Muddy's bed. The sun had come out, bursting from the rubble of torn clouds—shining with false brilliance, then covered by clouds again, then shining brighter than before. Rays pierced the window-glass and burned bright on Annie's tousled hair.

"Want to take Muddy to town in the wagon?" I asked Cotton.

"No. I reckon Vi don't either."

We heard Violet tramping the porch; then he came into the other room, carrying the shotgun which he placed across the kitchen table. At the sink he took a long drink of water from the dipper. Vi entered the bedroom and stood looking at the bed.

I had vague thoughts about an inquest and a coroner's jury and things like that.

Cot said, "Come outside a minute, Rich."

We each took a drink of water in the kitchen, as Violet had done. Cotton wiped his mouth with a hand that didn't tremble.

"No," he whispered, "if she can't ride nice in a hearse, I don't want to tote her to town at all. When Pappy was shot, this was newer country. There wasn't much Law and fuss around. We just buried him over on the hill nigh to those two little crab trees, and when people asked questions, we didn't answer. . . . 'Dust unto dust.' I guess that's out of the Bible."

There were her eyes, the roaming birds in her glance. A child heart, that played contentedly with banditry as ordinary children play cowboy-and-Indian . . . the prairie was her place, and she should be concealed there without formality, without the manipulation of sanctimonious or civilized hands.

I told Cot, "I'll make affidavit about her death, if anything like that is necessary. Do you want to build a—? Take boards and make——"

"She always likes growing things," said Cotton. I remember now the remote quality of his voice. "Grass

and weeds grow right out of the soil with nothing to hinder. She'd just as soon not have boards around her."

Annie and Violet had gone into the men's bedroom. Violet lay face down with fists in his pillow, and Annie sat beside him. I saw her bend with her cheek against the back of Violet's neck.

She got up blindly, and came out. She said to Cotton, "Anything I can do for her . . . let me do it."

Cotton whispered, "Reckon she'll sleep the way she always lived—no fancy shrouds for her. Just one thing: her face and her head . . . if we had something soft and white to cover them."

Annie said, "Leave me with her."

Cotton walked to the porch ahead of me. I saw that the ironing which Annie had done that morning was piled neatly on a chair, a crust of lace atop it. I drew the Goss boys' revolvers from inside my belt and slid them under the pile of new-pressed clothes.

Cotton and I went to the barn. I took a pick and he found a long-handled shovel. We crossed Evening Creek and began to dig a new grave close beside the grave of George Goss. I had never been there before; the boys always kept away from that clump of wild fruit trees. The grave of Mr. Goss was marked with little stones brought from the creek.

Soon after we began our work, Violet came to us. He carried a short spade, and a fork which he thought we might need. We took turns, working for at least two hours. The ground was quite hard and dry, except on the surface.

Sun blazed at us; we had to take off our coats. I removed my cartridge belt and gun, and put them on my folded coat. . . . Once I saw Violet looking at

them. Probably he was wondering what I had done with their own weapons.

It was early afternoon when Cotton said that the grave was ready. Violet straightened and looked at his brother.

"What about old Belle? She's still laying there in the yard."

"She's just a dog," Cotton told him, but kindly. "We'll put her safe somewheres."

Violet said, "I want her with Mud and Pappy. They'll like it that way."

Accordingly we made a little pit for Belle behind the briery trees, and then put on our coats and went to the house. Annie was sitting on the edge of the porch awaiting us.

I may have loved Annie Lingen before, but never have I respected human being more than I did that minute. Not only had she performed the last pathetic tenderness for the woman who had been kind to her, but she had done other things which might soothe the boys.

Mirror glass on the porch was swept away, and the frame of the mirror had vanished. Only a wet spot, drying fast, showed where the floor had been scrubbed. The little rocker stood tipped against the house wall. There was a white bundle on the porch—a sheet tucked around neatly: that was Belle. Annie had carried the heavy collie up there. Perhaps Violet spoke about burying Belle on the ridge, when he was mumbling his grief to Annie.

Annie wore the blue serge skirt which she and Muddy had made into a riding-dress. . . . As the boys and I went inside, I looked quickly at the laundered

garments on the chair. Folded clothing lay as before, but the gossamer lace—the petticoat which had been on top, was gone . . . something soft and white. That had been Cotton's request.

We men washed; we combed our hair. I didn't have any other coat to put on, but Violet and Cotton changed theirs. I took the heavy ironing-board into the bedroom; then came Cotton and Vi.

We carried our burden down to the creek and up the steepness of the opposite side, never stopping to rest, but moving with care and silence. Annie Lingen followed us; when we were standing by the fresh-turned earth Annie dissolved in tears.

"I couldn't find a Bible in the house——"

Cotton shook his head. "We never were what you might call religious folks," he muttered. "There was an old Bible that our grandpappy carried in the War, but one time the rats chewed it up."

We put Muddy in her grave and stood with cool wind touching our hair. Annie (who had dried her tears with a clean handkerchief offered by Violet) began to recite the Twenty-third Psalm . . . I could speak the words along with her through most of the verses. I heard a murmuring; the Goss boys struggled to join in the recitation. I think we felt better as the Psalm was said.

Cotton and I began to fill the grave, and while we worked Violet went down to the house; he came back carrying the bundle which was Belle. He buried the dog while Cotton and I finished our own task.

We wiped the sweat off our chins, and looked at each other. Violet's face was hard and pale under its tan; his jaws moved—he chewed tobacco again.

" . . . A head-board or cross, or something like that?" I asked.

Violet said, chewing, "We won't bother now; none of us could do it right; it would take a good while. Can we depend on you, Rich, to—maybe put up some kind of a mark later——?"

Annie was watching with frightened wonder.

"I'll look after it. Later. . . ." I said.

Annie cried shrilly, "There's something— I guess there's something I don't understand——"

Cotton Goss tried to smile at her. "It's just this, honey: Rich is—" His voice broke. He hooted, "Why am I bothering with this? You go ahead and tell her yourself!"

Annie came to me.

"Rich is a officer," said Violet dully. "He's going to take us away for robbing that train."

Annie murmured indistinctly: " . . . Had your guns—both of them—in his belt when he came. I saw them— He had your guns——" She could say nothing more; she stood and stared.

"That reminds me," said Cotton easily. "Just where did you put those pistols, Rich?"

I told him, "Don't mind about that."

"Oh yes," said Violet, "we got to mind! You ought to know us better than that—even if you are a policeman, even if you've been a policeman all along——"

"Let's get away from this here grave," whispered his brother.

Cotton and I tossed the shovels away. We moved to the trail which led down the slope a hundred feet or so to the north. The boys stopped. Annie stopped with them.

I turned quickly. "Come on, folks."

"We're not coming," said Violet, "till we get our guns."

I mopped my face. "Look, now," I said, "you've got to understand things. . . . I won't say any more about Muddy. You ought to know how I felt about her. Those men didn't try to serve any warrant. They didn't tell her she was under arrest—they didn't even guess that she had gone along with you when you stopped the train——"

Cotton said: "Rich. Where are our guns?"

"It'll be investigated," I cried. "It'll be squared off, as much as it can be now. Count on me for that. But the fact remains that you boys are in my custody. I'm responsible for you; I'm going to do my job and deliver you. Don't worry: I'm not going to turn you over to Sperry Cantwell. I'll take you up the line on the train. . . . One of these days Bush County is going to be blown inside out, and plenty will happen to Cantwell and the Tatums then. But this isn't your chance to wear guns or go hunting anybody."

Violet said, "Listen to him talk."

I drew my revolver, and Annie whimpered. I didn't feel like my name was Rich Williams or Lloyd Richland or anything else; I didn't feel human any more. I was just a machine, and I had to pull my gun.

"Please come on," I said.

The Goss boys were standing ten feet from me. Violet's hands twitched nervously, but Cotton merely folded his arms across his chest and smiled.

He suggested, "Annie, you go ahead with the gentleman if you want to. Vi and me, we're not going to Pahoka—not unharnessed."

"Come on," I whispered.

Cotton said, "Rich, get this straight. You give us our guns, and we'll ride right to Pahoka along with you. We'll do what we got to do; and then we give our oath to come peaceably on the train or wherever you need to take us."

I heard my voice shaking. "God damn it! Do I have to shoot you boys in sight of your own mother's grave?"

"Reckon we couldn't name a better place."

My hand began to wobble. There wasn't any other way out of this. I might have known it all along.

That is one trouble with being an officer for too many years: you think there's a rule which can be extended to cover every situation, but there isn't any such rule. Facts aren't elastic; they simply won't stretch enough sometimes. Flesh and blood can travel about so far, and then they bump up against something they can't see—something strong enough to stop them.

The Goss boys wouldn't stir a step, and I wasn't able to drag the two of them. I could shoot them, or I could give them their guns.

"All right. I put your revolvers under Annie's ironing on the kitchen chair. They're still there, if she didn't find them when she was getting—" I stopped speaking . . . suddenly I could envision the froth of lace I had loved, and I was strangely glad that forever it would be vanished in the soil of Oklahoma.

The Goss boys went down the hill without another word. They reached the house ahead of me, and when I came in they were loading their weapons studiously.

"Anything you want, Rich," said Cotton, "you

better take along now. . . . I don't know about her. If she wants to stay here——" He looked at Annie questioningly.

The girl put her fists in front of her eyes.

"Not here," she cried. "I can't stay here any longer. Not . . . alone."

Cotton said, "Vi, you take your saddle off that Tony horse, and put it on Sissy."

Quanah and Tony were in their stalls, saddles and all, and we found Chief grazing over beyond the dump. Cotton had dropped the grain-sack containing the money; he left it on the porch a generation before, and one of us had kicked it into the kitchen. I found the lumpy bag under a chair; I got some twine and tied the sack firmly to my saddle-horn.

"There's cows out there in the pen——" Cot began, when he led Quanah up to the yard.

"Yes," I said. "The cow that's fresh—she shouldn't go un milked too long. Want to milk her now?"

He shook his head. "The hell with her."

"Likely," I told him, "Mr. Prescott will know a reliable man. I'll see that someone's sent out here tonight to look after things."

"Anything you say," whispered Cotton. "I don't care much what happens to stuff out here any more."

"Me," said Violet calmly, "I don't give a tinker's dam."

When Cotton helped Annie to mount on Sissy, his hand closed for a moment on her heel. "You got to remember this, honey. You can ride to town with the rest of us, but you got to stay out of the way after we get there. Rich, you'll keep her out of the way?"

I said that I would. Violet slid his long leg over

Tony's bare back and a minute later we were all going down the lane. The Goss boys didn't look back at their house; Annie's face was frosty and hard. I looked back once and then wished that I hadn't.

28

WE WERE ABOUT TWO MILES FROM PAHOKA City when I heard a freight engine whistling on the southern prairie. I had been riding in bitter blankness . . . sometimes the Goss boys talked, but not until days later could I remember just what they said.

I sorted train schedules in my mind. The wail sounded again, closer, ahead of us. . . . There was no way of knowing whether there were any cars to be picked up on the Pahoka City siding; perhaps the northbound freight would stop only for water or orders. In any event there wasn't much time to spare. Violet and Cotton rode together, a length behind Annie Lingen. They regarded me stonily as I came up.

"That's the freight bound for Portersville. I'm going ahead and try to hold it."

"For us?"

"I'll ride ahead. You meet me at the crossing."

I slapped Chief into a run. . . . Once I looked back. The Goss boys and Annie were jogging behind—a splash of water and pasty clay spread under their horses' feet. The road grew wetter; the Pahoka City

area had received heavier rainfall than the land to the west.

Later I was asked just how and why I dared leave my prisoners like that. It was suggested that they might have taken Annie and escaped across the fields, north or south, never to enter town at all. My answer was that anyone who knew the Goss boys would never even ask such a question. . . . Brew Tatum might have gone to the ranch he owned; but Charley and the sheriff were certain to be in Pahoka City; there was no place else for them to go.

As I spattered down the last slight hill I could see a freight train crawling through the flat valley ahead. Steam showed—the whistle-sound arrived: the engineer was blowing for the station.

I rode as fast as I could, mud scattering like brown paint, the horse gurgling and sighing as he labored. When I reached the track, the freight caboose stood a few rods beyond the crossing. Some of the freight crew, the old agent, a man who might have been working for the express company: they made a little group by the caboose steps, watching me approach.

I looked up Main Street to the stores lining the flat hilltop. Square and ugly they stood against the sky, as they had the previous Saturday . . . this was Saturday again. Sometimes there are weeks that lie more heavily than years across the life of a man.

Ruts were filled with shimmers of water, shallow lakes brightened the low places. I wondered at the absence of vehicles and horses in front of the stores. A few men clustered talking near the Racket Store. . . .

Beside the roadside watering-trough a buggy was

drawn up. A man rested his foot on the wheel, talking to two others in the seat. I saw their faces turn as I rode toward the caboose.

It wasn't hard to pick the freight conductor now. He wore a round black cap with a plate fastened above the bill.

"You're the conductor?"

He nodded quickly. "Freight conductor. This is a freight train, Mister. We don't carry passengers except the eleven cars of sheep we got," and he laughed.

"You'll carry passengers," I said.

I showed my badge, then my marshal's commission. Out of my money belt I took a letter from the S. C. & W. general office in Kansas City, and a note from the division superintendent.

The freight conductor examined these things with keen interest . . . the engineer began to ask for the high-ball; a brakeman was working his way back along the string of cars. Sheep bleated persistently.

"What can we do for you, Mr. Richland?"

"Hold this freight." That would cost me my job at least. "What's behind you?"

"Nothing behind. Number Thirty-two"—he looked at his watch—"she's just about out of the yards at Portersville, southbound. She'd have to lay over at Oakley."

"Then you'd better go in and send a wire," I said. "Tell Oakley and Portersville that I'm holding you here."

"How long, Mr. Richland?"

I looked toward the west. Annie and the Goss boys were black figures on the narrow road—black figures growing bigger.

"Maybe fifteen or twenty minutes."

The conductor hurried into the office with the brakeman following him.

I gave the rein of my horse to the express agent; I walked back about ten paces from the caboose and then halted on the track. Three men approached warily from the direction of the horse-trough. They were the ones who had been in the buggy and beside it. I hadn't known who they were; I only made sure that Cantwell or the Tatums weren't in the group.

The man ahead was Mr. Prescott; I didn't know the two with him. One wore a tiny Maltese cross on his coat lapel, and had a little gray dagger of a beard; you could have picked him for a Confederate veteran a mile away.

They all stopped, and then Mr. Prescott said something, and they came on again.

Prescott edged through the weeds along the railroad grade and held up his hands to show that he wasn't armed. "We want to talk to you a minute," he called.

"All right, come ahead."

I looked at the road again. The Goss boys and Annie were coming. I could see the sun on Annie's hair.

Mr. Prescott and his friends walked along the ties. "Look here, mister," said Prescott. "We don't want our town turned into a shooting gallery."

"You've let it turn into something a good deal worse, Mr. Prescott."

"Now, we heard Mrs. Goss was hurt! We hope not bad! She's a real pleasant soul——"

I said, "She's dead, Mr. Prescott. We buried her out on the prairie," and then my foolish brain took up the

next line of an old song: *and the coyotes did howl over her. . . .*

Prescott's good-natured face turned gray. The other men glanced nervously toward Cotton and Vi. We could hear the splash and thud—we could almost hear the squeak of saddles as they came on at a walk.

"Anything to this story about your being a detective?" Prescott whispered.

"Yes. That's correct."

He stammered, "Well, why the devil didn't you identify yourself the other day?"

I told him that I was working on a job; I didn't dare identify myself.

"Sperry Cantwell doesn't believe that story for one minute," said the older man behind Prescott.

The Goss boys were near enough for us to see their faces. Prescott looked at them. "Look here," he muttered rapidly to me, "the Tatums have got men stuck all over town."

"What do you mean—men?"

"That's what I do mean: they ran around and fetched in several hand from Brew's place. Charley's got the few who were always at his beck and call. Cantwell's sworn in half-a-dozen more deputies. They're all over town."

He ducked his head, as if so overcome that he dared not present himself to the gaze of Cotton and Violet Goss.

There was shame mingled with this trepidation—the shame of an easy-going citizen who sees tragedy arising out of his own carelessness and the carelessness of his fellows.

"You got to keep these boys from going up town."

There was nothing which I wanted to do in the world more than that; but I couldn't see how to manage it. I had not in so many words promised the Goss boys a chance to meet their enemies, but it had been a choice of either giving them back their revolvers or shooting them in their tracks; I had chosen the only way I could choose.

Cotton muttered to Violet; they stopped their horses near the platform. Vi reached over and grasped Sissy's rein, when Annie Lingen had trouble holding the mare.

As we watched, Cotton Goss examined us steadily; he slid out of his saddle. He passed his rein up to his brother and then came toward our group, standing as we did between the bright steel rails.

"Cot," I said, "Mr. Prescott is a friend of yours. He's just told me that the Tatums have got men everywhere along Main Street, waiting for you to come."

The old, bearded Confederate said to Cotton, "Boy, I knowed your father. You know who I am—I'm Harney Lester. In memory of your father, I ask that you don't go up town." *

The roving glance of Cotton Goss caressed those hilltop buildings. "In memory of our mother, Captain Lester, we got to go."

I seemed to see it before I heard it: the quick snarl of a rifle shot. My eyes were on Cotton and beyond him. I saw Violet Goss dumped against Tony's neck as the colt shrieked and flung his head. The shot had been fired so close at hand that it fairly stung our ears.

Tony swung his forefeet, arching far . . . I

thought he would fall over backward on Violet and mash the man flat. The young horse struck his feet against the ground once more, and began to buck. Still screaming, he went pitching up the right-of-way; Vi was hanging on, but only with his left hand.

Mr. Prescott's finger shook as he pointed. "Right over there! I saw him— On the pile——"

The pile he meant was a heap of railroad ties corded up in log-cabin fashion—a solid turret seven feet high. It stood a few rods beyond the caboose; brown reeds grew around it.

Some object moved on top of the ties, and I ran that way. One voice cut the air behind me: "It got Vi Goss!" and someone else shrieked: "No, he got the girl. . . ." There was a clash, a clatter of metal from the other side of the ties. When I was still about ten feet from the pile, something rushed past me: Cotton Goss, going faster with his long stride than I could go.

He took the left side of the pile, I leaped to the right. A man had dropped to the ground from his station atop the heap. He had a Winchester rifle, but the lever was drawn back only halfway. The picture came in an instantaneous flash: the struggle of the man's hands, wrenching steel as he tried to force another shell into the chamber . . . water flew from his lips . . . sandy brown head and shirt of blue flannel.

It was the civil engineer, Bradley; he rode on that fatal expedition to the Goss farm, but I had never seen him before. . . . This wasn't the kind of rifle Bradley had fired to his pride during the Cuban war; it was never a bolt-action Mauser or Krag or Springfield. It wasn't the kind of rifle he was trained to manipulate.

Cotton stepped past the corner, and then the gun lever cracked up into place. Bradley fired wildly: a dust of wood struck out from the tie nearest Cotton's head. In the same second Cot's revolver spurted in its weighted holster.

Bradley lay chewing the weeds; his legs drew and bent, and then ceased to move.

I thought Annie must have been shot (someone had cried that she was shot) but as I looked toward the tracks I saw old Captain Lester lifting her to her feet and taking out a handkerchief to wipe her clothing. Annie's hand crept to her chin as she stared after Violet . . . she had been thrown by Sissy, that was all. The wounded colt had struck Annie's mare in his first lunge; Chief and Quannah had been frightened loose as well.

I cried, "Cot, Vi's all right—there he goes!" The buckskin colt was pawing far west along the railroad tracks, bounding as if his hoofs had springs on them. For all the absence of saddle, for all the fact that he clutched the rein with one hand, Violet Goss still clung to Tony's back; his legs wrapped the angry flesh under him.

Now Annie Lingen tore away from men who held her and came stumbling toward us. Mud covered her skirt and jacket. I was close beside Cotton as she met us, and I gasped, "Hang on to Annie, Cot . . . see if she's all right. Hang on to her!" and I went running west along the tracks.

The distant buckskin spun like a top; he was coming back now, coming back along the right-of-way—first on one side of the rails, then on the other. Some-

times he would break his pitching pace, and gallop, and then strike the earth with all four feet again.

Mr. Prescott ran into the road near the trough. He waved his hat and shouted, striving to head Tony off as the colt twisted north from the crossing. Insane horse, insane rider, they skipped away from Mr. Prescott. They went by me, maybe twenty feet away: Violet was still hanging on, but his face looked like nothing human and his right arm swung limp from the shoulder. There was red paint on Tony's neck: maybe his own blood—maybe Vi's—maybe the blood of both.

Through wide weeds they went slamming, on, on, up the east slope where back doors and fences and rain-water barrels clustered in empty confusion behind the stores.

I tore the wet grass in pursuit. Once I threw a glance over my shoulder. Cotton was still with Annie Lingen, beside the red caboose. She was keeping him there, though he struggled to get away; Annie was hanging to him bodily. Two other figures tumbled in my direction, but a long way back. . . . It seemed that I was crawling the tangled slope with burs restraining me; still I must have been running as hard as I ever ran in my life. I wanted to herd Violet away from the main street.

I couldn't do it. The side lane—the mere alley of wheel tracks beside Lucian Barrow's studio—this was a broad avenue leading to destruction. At first it seemed that the Tony colt might go jerking safely away into open country; but in all agony his white and rolling eyes had picked the cleared path which led uphill.

His rider seemed a slim and useless sack of meal, self-bound against the bloody neck. I remembered the night when Tony had been grazed by a bullet out at the Goss place; now such torment had returned to him, but in the shape of a deeper wound that drained and stung . . . a knife sticking his neck, and not even his master could take it away.

They roared past as I reached the lane. The force of their going, the mauling beat of hoofs, seemed yanking Violet's head from his shoulders at every plunge. They romped directly to the wide street intersection and I heard many shots rap and echo between the buildings.

Tony spilled into the mud, head down, as if poured out of a bucket. I ran up alongside a clapboard structure bordering this side-hill lane. Across the way, at the northwest intersection, two men moved behind the barrels in front of a feed store.

But it was at the other corner, on the porch of the Palace Hotel, where Violet's chief enemy waited. He stood in plain sight—Brewster Tatum—and I was surprised to see him; I had thought he might be cowering beneath a table or under a bed. There was an undreamed hardihood about the man; though anyone might say it didn't take a great deal of courage to shoot at a wounded horse and an injured rider.

Violet Goss had been thrown heavily when Tony went down. He had smashed through a pool of water and brought up in mire beyond. While I was still half the length of a building away from that corner, I could see Violet on his knees.

He attempted to get his gun out of his shoulder

holster. Twice he tried to lift his right arm, and failed each time. Brewster Tatum edged behind an awning post. I saw him lift the rifle he was carrying.

There wasn't any reason in the world now—no law or order in all creation. I wasn't an officer. I was just a man who had been fond of Violet Goss. I leaned against the building and my right hand slid down to my holster.

My gun wasn't there. I didn't have a Bisley model Colt any longer. It lay, perhaps, hidden in weeds back yonder along the path of my scramblings. . . .

Brew Tatum fired, and so did the men by the feed store. Spray rose in a little pattern behind the kneeling figure of Violet but I don't think any of the bullets hit him that time. He came up with his sore left arm and worked his revolver out of its holster. Tatum tried to drift back behind the square post once more, and I remember how some glancing ray of sun studded the mechanism of his rifle. . . . Violet aimed steadily—revolver clenched in his left hand. He lowered the gun helplessly, as if the strain were too much. His lips must have gone back from his teeth when he sighted again.

He fired twice . . . while the sound of his shooting still rang in the street, I could hear him snapping away with futility. Vi's revolver 'wouldn't fire more than two shots: mud had jammed it when he fell.

But two shots were all he needed—maybe it was only one. Tatum took mincing steps, walking out from behind the post, and even at that distance his face carried an expression of bewilderment. He still held his gun; then he dropped it as he fell heavily against the next post supporting the awning. He got

both arms around the post and hung on for a moment. Then he slid down and rolled off into the mud.

A lot of people were yelling but I didn't hear what they said. Violet Goss was on his feet, going west. He took enormous strides—great sliding paces through the mud. He lurched first one way and then the other, and I couldn't see whether he still carried that useless revolver in his left hand.

Just ahead of me a man in a checkered shirt stepped out of the building against which I stood, and started to lift a revolver. His back was turned to me; when I howled at him he ducked into the doorway again, without even turning to see who had called.

But there were others of the Cantwell and Tatum people at hand; they closed in from every direction, moving like skirmishers on a battle-front. The avenue down which Violet staggered led up blind against a white house and yard. It was Charley Tatum's house, but I didn't know it then. . . . The two men came out from behind their feed store barrels; already there were others in the muck outside the Palace Hotel, trying to lift the heavy shape of Brewster Tatum.

"He ain't breathing," a voice yelled.

I heard another voice—I thought it was Sheriff Cantwell's—"Well, get Goss, why don't you? Get that——"

Fifteen or twenty men were pressing into the open space, into the blind lane down which Violet Goss went posting on his grasshopper limbs. They seemed like a hundred men to me; they were all in the way. It was miraculous that I could see Violet, or count the wild outlandish steps he took . . . yet he was so tall.

I think of him now as being ten feet high and proportionately thin. He towered above and beyond the men who came on him from the rear. He was walking a solitary beat on a mountain where no other feet might tread.

Again the curt Cantwell voice said, "Get him," and a solitary shot banged in answer. Violet jerked as if someone had thrown a rock and hit him; he kept going. I do not believe he knew what he was doing or just where he walked. He wanted to leave those men—he wanted to close a door behind him, to seek a realm of dignified safety. Citizens measured the distance afterward: he walked two hundred and thirty feet from the place where he shot Brew Tatum.

A man made a strangely casual query, "Charley, anybody in your house?" And Charley Tatum answered from the hotel porch, "No, by God. Shoot the hell out of him!"

The guns began to talk immediately in a spiteful chorus of approval—windows broke in the white house—but I wasn't watching the other men who fired. I watched Charley Tatum up on the hotel piazza—on the board platform before the door. He had his own revolver out, and was firing with ease over the heads of people who stood in the way.

Violet fell down against the foundation of the Tatum house, but still Charley and the others kept hurting him with their bullets. I had seen a fellow shoot a snake literally to pieces, the same way, but Violet Goss wasn't any snake.

I turned around and went down the hill, beyond Mr. Barrow's studio, walking with my right hand

pressed into the holster where my gun should have been. I was halfway through the weeds toward the station when I found my revolver lying amid fox-tail grass. I picked it up carefully. Something snapped in my brain.

29

OFTEN I HAD HEARD THAT EXPRESSION USED BEFORE, but didn't realize the literal accuracy until it happened to me. It was as if a ribbon of rubber were drawn across my eyes, simultaneously before them and behind them: enormous hands far on the margin of consciousness pulled the rubber tighter and tighter. . . .

It wasn't broken at first—it turned grayish-red and then to a bright semi-transparent pink . . . the huge ribbon narrowed and tightened, narrowed and tightened: it was brighter than ever. It was pulled beyond mercy; then I heard and saw it snap, and felt the stinging impact through my whole body.

I walked among the last weeds—dry burs of autumn all over my pants—my hand caressing the new-filled holster.

Smoke and steam drifted from the locomotive—I could hear the hiss and singing they made. People by the train had heard all that shooting in town. Perhaps one or two of them were already vanished up the southerly slope, far past the horse-trough and Racket Store; but I could count the folks who waited before

my gaze. There were Cotton Goss and Annie Lingen and Mr. Prescott—these whom I knew—and a smear of others behind them.

Annie's face was tear-stained and savage, but she clung still to Cotton's left arm; the sleeve was torn out of his coat at the shoulder.

"Rich," he gasped, turning his long face on me, "she wouldn't let go—she's got fingers like claws! Rich, where's Vi?"

"He's all right," I said. "Violet's all right."

"What was that shooting? Did they get him?"

I said calmly, "He's traveling fast. They'll never touch him."

"Did he get Brew Tatum first?"

"Yes."

Cotton rolled up his gray eyes; I heard him yell.

I said, "Get into the caboose—you too, Annie. Go inside; I want to talk to you a minute." And when they were slow about going, I screamed at the top of my lungs, "Go on!" and I thought I felt froth on my lips.

They started to climb the steps. Cotton scowled as he lifted Annie ahead of him. "Rich, I'm taking your word for it. Did Vi get away on that crazy colt of his?"

"Just a minute," I said, "and I'll be with you."

I crossed the platform and went around the corner of the freight house; I could see Chief standing there; it turned out that the expressman had caught the horse and tied him to a baggage truck. My grain sack, with holes in it, was still fastened to the saddle.

I gave it to the freight conductor.

"You turn this over to the super at Portersville. He's expecting it. It's got money in it," and his gray head nodded obediently.

I said, "The moment I leave the caboose, give the engineer— Is the engineer in his cab?"

"He went to look at that body by the ties, but I made him go back."

"The moment I come out of the caboose, you signal the engineer and get rolling. The man and woman are to ride as far as Oakley. You stop there and let them down. That's all: the money for the superintendent in Portersville, and those two people to be dropped at Oakley."

"I thought they was bandits," said the freight conductor.

I told him, "The bandits are still up town. Don't forget to let those folks off the train."

I got into the caboose and unfastened my money belt; Annie and Cotton Goss stared as I removed two big folds of currency.

This was my own money—I had to provide for expenses in advance, and this time I'd carried seven hundred dollars—six hundred and ninety, to be completely accurate. Sometimes I needed money to grease the wheels of justice, and usually there was a lot of red tape about getting myself paid back by my employers. This time I wouldn't have to worry about that. Nobody would be paying me back.

I put the ragged, warm-pressed currency into Annie Lingen's lap, and she lifted her round and tired eyes.

"This train," I said, addressing Cotton, "will stop at Oakley. You get out with Annie, and strike off somewhere. Anywhere. I don't care where you go."

Through the close air of the caboose I heard my whispered words resounding far and wide. It seemed as if I were addressing a small audience in a broad and resonant auditorium.

"Local people took the law out of my hands," I said. "Now I'm taking the law out of theirs. I'm a judge and jury too. There's six hundred and ninety dollars in that roll . . . you could get another train westbound at Oakley tonight, but they'd probably be tracing you by that time. Better buy a couple of horses or maybe a rig—it's up to you. You take care of Annie."

I turned away, but Cotton Goss had my arm in his steel-trap grip before I'd moved six inches.

"Rich! I don't——"

"Never mind," I said in a dream, "I don't understand it either. Don't ask me to explain."

"Rich. You swear? Swear you're telling the truth? You mean Violet actually got away? I can scarce believe——"

I heard myself laughing and laughing. "Not on his colt," I said. "Not on Tony. They shot Tony when Violet reached the main drag; but he dropped Brew Tatum the very next second——"

Annie made a little scream—a rabbit-sound. "They'll catch him! They'll——"

"Not on what he's riding!" I cried. "What's the blackest and fastest horse in all the world . . . outside the world . . . in heaven or hell," I asked them, "what's the blackest horse?"

That wasn't as crazy as it sounds now. I knew the horse I was talking about . . . usually its Rider has a cowl drawn over his face.

But Cotton was not given to poetic utterance and he thought, naturally, that I referred to that expensive black mare of Charley Tatum's.

He sank back on the hard leather bench. "They'll never catch up with Vi," he said positively.

"No, they won't."

"Why are you letting me go? I mean, *helping* me go——"

"Maybe I think it isn't fair for you to serve your time when Violet never had to serve his! Go carefully after you get to Oakley, Cot. Catch a night freight west. Or buy a good team . . . take care of . . ."

He sobbed briefly as we shook hands. "Maybe Annie and— Maybe we'll run across Vi somewhere."

I walked out on the platform of the car without looking at Cotton again.

Annie cried softly—cried my name. When I turned around, she was there to kiss me. She kissed me rapidly five or six times—hot, dry kisses—her mouth kept burning the skin of my face wherever she touched it——

Right then I had a lucid second in which I saw things clearly. I realized that Annie Lingen had drunk deeper of love with me, than with either of the Goss boys. . . . I felt an understanding of the force within this woman; I worshiped the power that charged her. She had been around us all, compelling us, crowding us in the brief nightmare through which we lived.

She would be a dream in memory as long as I was capable of memory; I didn't know how long that would be. I spoke her name once, but it didn't seem to mean anything when I said it. Then I felt the cinders under my feet, and the knowledge struck me

acutely that there, above those same cinders, was the place where first I had seen Annie Lingen on another railroad train a hundred and some hours before. I figured it out later—one hundred and seventy-three hours.

The conductor's face was before me, baffled, still believing in me.

"Oakley," I said thickly.

He waved his white-gloved hand. The drivers began to turn; there came the long *clack, clack, clack* of box cars jerking as they caught the pull. The conductor swung up the steps of the caboose when the train moved, and I could hear sheep bleating ahead. Their cry mingled with the crush of steam and grind of metal. Metal and steam were crushing around Annie Lingen; I hoped that Cotton would save her from them . . . Annie had loved all three of us, but she still had one left.

Wherever she wandered with him—whether they went drilling honest wells in Oregon or herding sheep along the desert (somewhere like that they would go, but they might never meet Violet among sagebrush or rivers dry in summer)—wherever Annie made her wedded life with Cotton, she would have a portion of that affection which her greedy little heart had claimed from us all.

It was different with me. I loved only one woman; now I had nothing left except the ability to hate certain men.

(I thought I would probably get ten or twenty years, but actually I received a shorter sentence; and that was for letting Cotton go—not for the thing I did behind the Palace Hotel that afternoon.)

On my way up town a few people may have observed me coming, but I was insensitive to scrutiny by this time. A big crowd pressed around Violet Goss at the Tatum house; they had him exhibited on the cellar door, and they were all looking at him.

It seemed inexpressibly weird that Charley Tatum and Sperry Cantwell should be there, mulling words, when they had shot but one of the Goss boys and hadn't accounted for me at all. Later I heard how a rumor spread along the street, the way absurd reports do: a rumor to the effect that the rest of us all bolted on our horses, when Mr. Bradley fired at Violet from behind the ties.

I think Cantwell and Charley Tatum were discussing plans for our pursuit, at the very moment I found them, though I can't be certain.

A shabby black bug tried to push its way among the people—a bug carrying a load. It was Lucian Barrow. He seemed frantically drunk but he was dragging his big camera just the same.

"Let me in there! Let me get in before the light's too low . . . photograph . . . let me pass . . ." And clearly I could see the picture he would preserve: Violet on the cellar door, with numerous wounds showing. *Violet Goss. Shot down in Pahoma City, Okla., September 21, 1901. As he looked 20 min. after death.*

Mr. Barrow cried, "Photograph . . . let me . . ."

I told him, "If you want to take pictures, just wait a minute. You can take a lot." I was through the crowd by that time, and Cantwell and Charley Tatum saw me coming.

The way they started shooting, it is a wonder more

people weren't struck, even though the crowd melted as rapidly as it might. Men barked their shins over the well-curb as they ran. Two by-standers—or by-runners—were wounded; but not by my bullets and not seriously.

I only had to fire three shots . . . it seemed that Violet owed me a quarter again, and I wished he would wake up so I might collect. I went into the hotel and threw my gun on the desk, and waited for somebody—somebody to take me into custody—to see that I paid an important debt which all justice assured me should at once be paid.

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY



138 310

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY